

Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics

An Examination of the Psychological Underpinnings of
Human-Object Relationships with Implications for Museum Exhibitions

Phase V. Case Study with Object Donors and Visitors to the *Fashion Unraveled*
exhibition at the Museum at FIT, New York, NY

*"Seeing the quilt garment in the show triggered a solution to share with my sister.
I can help solve the problem maybe, and allow my aunt's quilt to live on. It's a healing
idea, it could change our relationship in a good way."*



Photo: Alexander Joseph

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Introduction

The intent of this qualitative research is to examine the psychological underpinnings of the intrinsic relationships between people and objects, and define the ways in which object engagement impacts health, healing and wellbeing in a museum setting. Data to-date has been culminated from 97 qualitative interviews across four international museum settings and a therapeutic wilderness facility, including 16 open sourced online qualitative surveys. Participant samples included adults aged 18 and older from a breadth of ethnocultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, and a range of types of museum participation. Evidence shows that across this diverse sample, exhibition experiences are potent and unique in their ability to foster wellbeing and contribute to psychological healing, suggesting that by further identifying and articulating the inherent role that objects play in our everyday health and wellbeing we can explicitly design exhibition experiences with objects that foster healthful outcomes. This document presents the theory of *Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics* (Cowan 2015) and provides summaries of the first four phases of research, and complete documentation and analysis for the fifth case study with the Museum @ FIT. Implications and direction for continued study conclude the document. For further information and prior studies see www.psychotherapeuticobjectdynamics.com

Background and Body of Scholarship

This research draws upon the irrefutable knowledge that objects are both deeply meaningful and necessary in the lives of people. The journey of the study begins with the question why. It can be said that people have an innate and primal dialogue with objects, an inextricable meaning-based relationship that functions in the manner of a continuous and often subconscious or unintentional nonverbal dialogue. Objects can extrinsically communicate our own concepts and thoughts with intent; conversely, they can internally translate complex concepts, thoughts and actions; they can prompt memory, connect us with others, access subconscious experiences and emotions; they can foster transpersonal experiences that include heightened creativity, spirituality, and self-awareness, and they can prompt us to action. This study seeks to understand and articulate the reasons people attribute these characteristics to objects and have such profound object experiences. Moreover, the study delves into the underlying psychological underpinnings of human-object relationships and explores the premise that at its core, the human-object relationship is necessary to psychological health and wellbeing.

This study was prompted by foundational work in the museum and material culture professions particular to the phenomenological and evocative nature of objects, the influence of everyday objects in the lives of people, the nature of object-based meaning making and the defined characteristics that shape those meanings. Essential research in the human-object relationship are

provided by John Dewey and his landmark work with the interconnections of self, objects, identity and activity (1934), and likewise, the more recent work in semiotics by Taborsky who looks at the formation of meaning making through object engagement (1990). To understand the nature of visitor relationships in the museum environment, we look to the fundamental works of Lois Silverman (1999) and George Hein (2000) whom provide us with a framework for studying object relationships and examining the role of the exhibition to foster meaning making where objects hold the power to illustrate, explain, captivate and enable visitors to relate to content in a personally significant manner. Additionally, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill's relevant work looks at the relationship between the 'seer' and the 'seen' (2000) where an exhibition space is the forum for union between an individual's life experiences and interpretations provided by the museum.

More recently, Latham and Wood present to us their essential work, the Object Knowledge Framework (2014): a framework for identifying the multidimensional people-object relationships in museum environments. Their study looks at interrelationships between work in phenomenology and the ways in which humans on an instinctual level seek to make meaning out of objects, as explored in museum-based research. In their *Object Knowledge Framework*, Wood and Latham have contributed the definition of 'Unified Experience,' that asserts four key characteristics of object experiences including Unity of the Moment (fusion of the visitor's 'lifeworld' and object world in a moment); Object Link (objects as repositories); Being Transported (the transpersonal); and Connections Bigger than Self (numinous qualities including reverence, spirituality and connections with higher things). The work of Dr. Helen Chatterjee provides insight and leadership in the exploration of the relationship between objects, emotions, touch and healing, with particular attention paid to the opportunities museums provide for cultivating touch experiences with healthful outcomes. Her own clinical work in hospitals with museum touch boxes provides the therapeutic and museum communities with a baseline for examining the therapeutic benefits of touch with hospital patients, staff and students (2008).

Additional foundations for this research are found in psychoanalytical, cultural and sociological theory in which objects signify human factors such as self and identity, the relationship of individuals to family/society (Rochberg-Halton, 1984, Fowler, 2010), and personal power/primal self (Nguyen, 2011). Cultural theorist Meaghan Morris brings us *critical proximity* (2006) which defines the relationship between a lived past and its representation in the object where the convergence of the two effect change. The work of developmental psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has provided an essential guiding definition of overarching object characteristics, including power (vitality and energy), self (personal identity and continuum), and society (relationship and hierarchy) (1984). Social theorist Sherry Turkle's work with objects contributes the theory of *evocative objects* (2012) as silent partners and life companions, repositories for memory and history, and as provocateurs of thought and action. Of additional particular interest is the work of Pierre Lemmonier who describes objects as being multidimensional devices of non-verbal communication that perform social intercourse, or

communication that is a part of everyday life yet not always consciously recognized. The object converges, or instantaneously activates a coalescence of feelings, circumstances, and domains of experience in the context of its making or use. Lemmonier refers to objects in this respect as *perissological resonators* (2012) whose material use triggers emergent, nonverbal statements that speak what words cannot and can communicate “unspeakable truths.”

In his work, historical anthropologist Greg Dening explores human-object actions that are prompted by emotionally disturbing prior experiences or history (1996). This theory is very applicable to the September 11th Memorial Museum and War Childhood Museum case studies as well, and provides significant underpinning to defining the dynamic of ‘Synergizing.’ Of particular relevance to the object dynamics of ‘Touching’ and ‘Making’ is Dudley’s concept of *materiality* (2010), where sensory engagement can be the leading factor in the development of interpretive value, even when in the absence of content knowledge. Additionally important is the work of Hugo Critchley in the neuroscience of touch and its relationship between the skin’s role in homeostasis and the conveyance of sensation to the emotional regions of the brain (2008). Critchley likens the impact and affect of the emotional touch experience to the notion of a *hypnoglyph*; touch can stimulate positive emotional power and calming impact directly attributable to wellbeing and health.

Finally, two researchers of note provide information on the relationship between therapy and museums, each suggesting that exhibition visitation has a direct healing impact on audiences. The insightful work of Andree Salom (at the Center for Transpersonal Studies in Colombia) describes the *numinous characteristics* (Harding 1961) in certain objects, and the emotive quality of exhibition spaces, as kindlers of transpersonal experience in exhibitions, opening up visitors to flow states, spiritual inspiration, self reflection, deepened awareness and mindfulness (2009). In similar fashion, *Muse Therapy* is the term used by Manoru Adachi at the Nagoya University Museum, where he has studied the healing impacts of arts-based museum programming – in conjunction with object-based exhibitions – on primary and secondary school-aged students (2003). He focuses on mental stress in students, and how multiple visitations and multi-sensory interaction with museum specimens indicated “recovery from the problems” (of mental stress). Altogether, this groundwork has encouraged three phases of research defining the theory of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics, and will continue to underscore the work towards practical museum-based applications.

Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics

Objects are on a fundamental level, essential to psychological health, wellbeing and healing, evidence of which can be seen in seven specific universal actions comprising the theory of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics. The theory refers to the inherent relationships between an object and its characteristics, the dynamic actions between the object and a person, and the resultant psychological impact of those actions. The theory that objects are primary to psychological health, wellbeing, and healing, explains why objects have undeniable and common evocative and phenomenological characteristics inherent to meaning making. Data from the research to-date illustrates that individuals, regardless of ethno-cultural, geographic or socioeconomic bearing, are activating primary states of mental health, stages of the healing process, and illustrating fundamental elements of human development via their object actions.

The seven dynamic actions comprising the theory are: *Composing, Associating, Making, Releasing/Unburdening, Giving/Receiving, Touching* and *Synergizing*. These highly interrelated and multidimensional domains coalesce around fundamental scholarship in the disciplines of material culture, museum studies, psychology and psychotherapy. In application, the theory suggests that object-based exhibitions can be explicitly designed to enhance the psychological healing capacities of museum visitors and to attend to the everyday psychological health and wellbeing of museum participants.

Each Object Dynamic is comprised of specific object characteristics and healthful/healing impacts as follows:

Releasing/Unburdening

The action of releasing an object from a state of highly associative ownership into another place or state to permanently remove it from its former association (meaning) and state of ownership.

Object Characteristics

Unified Experience (Latham, Wood), Bearing Witness (Hoskins), Life Companions (Turkle), Critical Proximity (Morris)

Healthful/Healing Attributes

Resilience, self-efficacy, containment, empathy, stabilization, self-regulation, mindfulness

Associating

The action of maintaining and keeping within close physical proximity to an object in an effort to perpetuate the knowledge/memory of the object's associations including experiences, states of being, places and people.

Object Characteristics

Unified Experience (Latham, Wood), Bearing Witness (Hoskins), Life Companions (Turkle), Critical Proximity (Morris)

Healthful/Healing Attributes

Self-efficacy, mindset, self identity, mindfulness, self regulation, trauma recovery

Giving/Receiving

The action of donating or offering to another person or people an object with the intention of its being accepted, and the resultant act of its being received with its attributed meaning being mutually understood and held intact.

Object Characteristics

Unified Experience (Latham, Wood), Bearing Witness (Hoskins), Life Companions (Turkle), Provocations of Thought (Turkle)

Healthful/Healing Attributes

Resilience, trauma recovery, stabilization, connection with family/society, perspective-making

Composing

The action of juxtaposing objects with the intent of forming and expressing a concept or idea in order to coalesce, examine and convey a meaning that cannot otherwise be fully explained or expressed.

Object Characteristics

Unified Experience (Latham, Wood), Bearing Witness (Hoskins), Provocations of Thought (Turkle), Perrisological Resonators (Lemmonier)

Healthful/Healing Attributes

Self expression and communication, connection with society, self awareness, mindfulness, self identity, containment

Making

The action of generating an original or newly-formed object as a means of experiencing and implementing the phases of the fundamental creative process.

Object Characteristics

Primal Power (Nguyen), Unified Experience (Latham, Wood), The Transpersonal (Salom), Materiality (Dudley), Perrisological Resonators (Lemmonier), Hypnoglyph (Critchley)

Healthful/Healing Attributes

Self awareness, endurance, stabilization, emotional grit, mindfulness, resiliency, containment, self-regulation

Synergizing

The action of contributing an object to a collective whose components produce a meaning larger than the individual alone.

Object Characteristics

Unified Experience (Latham, Wood), Bearing Witness (Hoskins), Provocations of Thought (Turkle), The Transpersonal (Salom), Life Companions (Turkle), Critical Proximity (Morris)

Healthful/Healing Attributes

Resilience, endurance, wholism, perspective-making, stabilization, empathy, mindfulness, connection with society

Touching

The action of touching an object either consciously or unconsciously when thinking or speaking about its meaning.

Object Characteristics

Hypnoglyph (Critchley), Materiality (Dudley), Perrisological Resonators (Lemmonier), Unity of the Moment (Latham and Wood), Primal Power (Nguyen)

Healthful/Healing Attributes

Resilience, endurance, wholism, stabilization, mindfulness, emotional grit, containment, self-regulation

Summary of Fieldwork and Case Studies 2015-2018

Initial Field Research

The theory of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics was developed via field research by Associate Professor Brenda Cowan in 2015. This initial study examined potential areas of confluence between object interpretation and meaning making in museum practice with objects as used in therapeutic practice. Grounding the study in the body of scholarship defining the phenomenological and evocative nature of objects, their influence in the lives of people, and the characteristics that shape those meanings, I explored the reason for those meanings: their fundamental psychological underpinnings. Converging the disciplines of museum and object studies, psychology and psychotherapy, I followed the premise that people have an innate and necessary relationship with objects that I call “primal dialogue,” that is essential to personal meaning making and to an individual’s psychological health.

I determined that object-based therapy would be an appropriate and unique arena for study and conducted field research in the use of objects at an adolescent therapeutic wilderness program in North Carolina (Trails Carolina), and also interviewed Ross Laird, a psychotherapist and expert in the making of objects as a means of self-discovery and actualization in Vancouver, British Columbia. The therapeutic work with objects at these venues correlated with research in the roles and interpretation of objects in museum exhibitions, as well as objects in relation to sociocultural identification, self-identification, power, and humanity. The study’s focus was placed on self-made objects and those found in nature, as opposed to branded and commercially mass-produced objects. At Trails Carolina (Lake Toxaway, North Carolina), interviews were conducted with the facility’s Clinical Director, Director of Students, a Therapist and Field Manager. Additionally, two days were spent in the field with a group of 9 adolescents engaged in the therapeutic process where observations were made of object-based individual and group therapy sessions, as well as wilderness lifestyle practices. At the Museum of Cultural Anthropology (Vancouver, British Columbia) I interviewed Dr. Ross Laird about his approach to creativity-based therapeutic practice and his expertise regarding the psychological impact of objects. The primary research findings resulted in the new theory of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics that illustrates how objects are inherent to an individual’s wellbeing and psychological health. Further details can be accessed at: www.psychotherapeuticobjectdynamics.com

Empirical Research with the National September 11 Memorial & Museum

Following the initial fieldwork and development of the theory, in 2016 I formed a partnership with Jason McKeown MS, LMFT, CPE, DCC, Director of Clinical and Family Services Trails Carolina, and Ross Laird, PhD, Interdisciplinary Creative Process, MA, Counseling Psychology. We entered into an empirical research phase to seek evidence for the theory of Psychotherapeutic

Object Dynamics by way of concrete examples in a museum environment. In coordination with the National September 11 Memorial & Museum (New York, NY), a case study was conducted with object donors to the institution's collection. <https://www.911memorial.org>

The National September 11 Memorial & Museum was selected because of its unique collections-donor relationship that suggested explicit demonstrations of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics. Eleven in-depth interviews were conducted with five widows, three survivors (including one who also lost a husband and one who lost a cousin), one mother who lost a son, one first responder, and one on-location journalist. The case study explored the therapeutic impacts of the participation of the object donors in the institution's acquisitions, the personal identification of the donors with their donated objects, and the psychological experience of the donors through the process of donation.

The interviewing methodology utilized a heuristic approach focused on generating qualitative data that captured participants' reflections on the idea of donation, the event itself, the meaning(s) of the donated object(s), and what if any, healing/meaning was found in the dynamic object experience. The data collected reinforced commonly held understandings of the meaningfulness of objects in everyday life, the potency of objects within museum environments, the value of participation, co-creation and open-content generation in exhibitions, and identified particular modes of design that are psychologically and interpretively impactful. Multiple subjects referred to their objects as "witnesses" to the event and to their own experience, and as the means by which the story of the event and their roles within it will be told. Most subjects referred to the need for the objects to keep the memory of their loved one alive, and/or the need for the objects to provide an accurate accounting of their experience. Most subjects referred to their objects as carrying a great deal of weight (responsibility). Subjects referred to the Memorial & Museum as a place where their objects will be kept safe, protected, and in that regard the institution is a "therapeutic ally."

Our review of the data revealed multiple examples of *Associating*, *Releasing/Unburdening*, *Synergizing*, *Touching*, *Composing*, *Making* and *Giving/Receiving*. Anecdotes from the subjects regarding the meanings of the objects, their relationships with the objects, their decisions for and actions of donating, and the impacts of those experiences provided supportive illustrations of the Dynamics as well as further information regarding the healthful and healing impacts of the donation process. Throughout the interviews, subjects also provided information that firmly represented established object characteristics and experiences including: objects as repositories of experience, bearing witness, perrisological resonators, life companions, materiality, calls to action, self identity, life continuum, and primal power. Detailed documentation can be accessed at: www.psychotherapeuticobjectdynamics.com

Empirical Research with the War Childhood Museum

In 2017 a third phase of research was conducted to further examine, contribute to and refine the theory of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics via case study in a museum environment. Building upon the data collected from the National September 11 Memorial and Museum case study, the researchers sought to broaden the subject and geography of their empirical work, and expand their sample to include museum visitors and staff in addition to object donors. The War Childhood Museum (WCM), Sarajevo Bosnia-Herzegovina (<http://museum.warchildhood.com>) was identified as a logical collaborator with which to further the study. The WCM is a new and unique institution whose collection is solely comprised of personal objects donated by individuals who were children during the war in Bosnia (1991-1995) and whose intent is to contribute to healing and wellbeing in its participants.

Following the same methodology and heuristic process, seventeen in-depth interviews were conducted at the museum site with ten object donors and seven post-visit audience members, followed by an informal interview with five members of the museum staff and leadership. Profound expressions of pride, ownership, agency, resilience and community overwhelmingly emerged as the most prevalent and coalescing themes of this study. Throughout the interviews with object donors and visitors these feelings and convictions were strongly and repeatedly described, and they were likewise echoed in the subsequent informal interview with museum staff and leadership. Subjects expressed strongly felt beliefs that the War Childhood Museum is an agent of personal and societal change where their singular contributions, stories and voices altogether express an impactful message of fortitude, endurance and strength unique to their unifying experience of a war childhood. Their participation with the museum is seen as a means of illustrating the innocence and endurance of childhood, and projecting a message of resilience and power specifically to and for the people of Sarajevo and Bosnia, as well as to others currently experiencing the tragedies of war elsewhere in the world. Their contributions of personal objects and stories, and the broader work of the museum, are not viewed solely as markers of historical events, but as vehicles through which to engage in positive civic action. The experience of object donation and viewing the collection encouraged a deep kind of openness, a perception of the unity of human experience, and an urgency to contribute, in small and personal ways, to healing the world through empathy and connection.

Illustration of numerous object characteristics emerged throughout the study including objects as repositories of experience, numinous, bearing witness, perrisological resonators, life companions, materiality, calls to action, self identity, life continuum, and primal power. Evidence of the seven tenets of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics were found in the data analysis including *Synergizing, Associating, Touching, Making, Giving/Receiving, Composing, and Releasing/Unburdening*.

Further details can be accessed at: www.psychotherapeuticobjectdynamics.com

Empirical Research with the Derby Museum & Art Gallery

The fourth phase of research was conducted in June 2018 to further examine, contribute to and refine the theory of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics via case study in a museum environment. Building upon the data collected from the first 3 studies, the researchers sought to broaden the sample and geography of their empirical work, and expand their pool of subjects to include museum visitors, volunteers, staff and object contributors. The Derby Museum & Art Gallery in Derby, England, was selected due to its innovative approach to museum participation, breadth of cultural artifacts as well as everyday objects within its collections, and its open source project titled “Objects of Love.” “Objects of Love” is a digital collection of personal objects and their meanings contributed by global participants, presented as a digital display within the institution’s World Cultures exhibition gallery. Another important factor in the selection of Derby Museums is its highly socioeconomically, culturally and ethnically diverse population, including a large population of immigrants from around the world, and a growing number of refugees from Africa and the Middle East. Brenda Cowan, Ross Laird and Jason McKeown conducted interviews with 35 individuals from across these diverse populations, including contributors to “Objects of Love,” museum staff, volunteers, and visitors post-visit.

Unique to this study was the emergence of a seventh Object Dynamic: *Touching*. A majority of subjects described an object experience involving the action of touching or holding, most often with their hand or fingers. Touching was described or demonstrated as either a conscious or unconscious activity when the subject was thinking about or explaining their object’s meaning in relationship to feelings of comfort, calm, mindfulness, uplift and joy. These descriptions were positive, empowering, and impactful, and correlate with comparable examples in prior studies, leading to the addition of *Touching* to the Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics’ framework.

In addition to evidence of seven Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics, the Derby Museum study revealed overarching themes that were highly consistent with our prior studies, as well as several that are unique to the museum and its constituency. Those overarching themes composed a portrait of highly personalized human-object relationships within a thriving community-museum relationship. As with prior studies, the overarching themes speak to concepts of self-identity, objects as storytellers, objects bearing witness, and the museum as a place of nurturance in a myriad of ways. The theme of *connection* was a predominant concept as it has been in every study. Connection, as described by subjects in the Derby Museum interviews, included very specific references to self (awareness and identity), to family, to friends, to heritage, history, place, and to the museum. The applications of the concept in this study were broad in scope and powerful in their explicitness and depth of meaning.

The concept of objects giving permission has come up in prior studies but was especially prevalent in this study, where objects were described as providing an allowance for an individual

to share their story, and to be “seen” or “heard.” These experiences were often linked with fond descriptions of the museum in turn allowing subjects to share, be seen and “leave their mark” via its participatory practices and ethos. Likewise particular were the concepts of mindfulness and descriptions of feelings of wellbeing. Here, subjects described objects being used as prompts for conversations to activate feelings of “being present,” and also as generating feelings associated with wellbeing such as respite, calm, love, acceptance, acknowledgement and a sense of “constancy.” Further details can be found at www.psychotherapeuticobjectdynamics.com

Phase V Case Study Overview

The Museum at FIT's exhibition, *Fashion Unraveled*

August 2018, Cowan, Laird, McKeown

Introduction

The fifth phase of research was conducted to further examine, contribute to and refine the theory of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics via case study in a museum environment. The Museum at FIT was selected for its breadth of audiences including international tourists, FIT students, faculty, and content experts, and the potent subject of its Spring 2018 exhibition *Fashion Unraveled*. Unique to the institution's standard convention of displaying pristine fashion garments, *Fashion Unraveled* featured clothing displaying wear, personalization and imperfection. The exhibition also included a digital display of a crowd-sourced project titled *Wearing Memories*, featuring clothing and associated personal stories from an online open call for contributors. Clothes are highly personal and provocative objects, and the researchers anticipated garnering rich information from this particular subject area. Over the course of one week, Brenda Cowan, Ross Laird and Jason McKeown conducted interviews with 13 individuals including visitors (post-visit) and an exhibition donor. Subjects were interviewed about their experiences resulting from the exhibition visit and were also invited to share associations with a meaningful item of clothing of their own.

The Museum at FIT

Located in the Fashion Institute of Technology's campus in Chelsea, New York City's fashion district, the mission of the Museum is to advance knowledge of fashion through exhibitions, programs and publications. The museum's permanent collection encompasses some 50,000 garments and accessories from the 18th century to the present. Important designers such as Adrian, Balenciaga, Chanel, and Dior are represented. The collecting policy of the museum focuses on aesthetically and historically significant directional clothing, accessories, textiles and visual materials, with emphasis on contemporary avant-garde fashion.

There are three galleries in the museum. The lower level gallery is devoted to special exhibitions, The Fashion and Textile History Gallery, on the main floor, which provides on-going historical context, presents a rotating selection of approximately 200 historically and artistically significant objects from the museums permanent collection. Every six months, the exhibition in the gallery is completely changed, although it always covers 250 years of fashion history.

Overview of Findings

In addition to evidence of the seven Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics, the Museum at FIT study revealed overarching human-object relational characteristics that are highly consistent with our prior studies. During the interviews subjects presented concepts of self-identity, self-awareness, objects as storytellers, objects bearing witness, and objects as life companions. Critical proximity also emerged in several instances during the interviews, where the subjects' past experiences represented by their personal objects prompted a new or changed call to action. Subjects in this case, during the interview process, verbalized a new intent to seek further information about their object, make change regarding their relationship with the object, or take action in their lives as a result of their reflections. (This dynamic also emerged in a few instances in the Derby Museum study and should be noted as an area of focus for future investigation.)

The resonant theme among all subjects when describing their attraction to the exhibition objects was *human connection*. The idea of seeing everyday clothing or clothing that might relate to their own life experiences in some way was very appealing, as was hearing the stories associated with them. The concept of connection to other people, to other places and times was predominant throughout the interviews, as it has been in every empirical study. *Memory* was also strongly represented in the data. Subjects described connectivity to memories and moments in their lives triggered by the personal object stories, as well as feelings of connectivity to broader eras or periods of time illustrated by the fashions on display.

Most subjects described memories of childhood and/or relationship-focused experiences when reflecting on the exhibition objects, as well as when sharing their own personal objects. These connections were often linked to relationships with a significant relative, and in several cases with an experience of loss.* Everyday and intimate objects, such as the clothing in *Fashion Unraveled* and especially *Wearing Memories*, provided the opportunity for deeply personal associations due to their relevance and human connection. These types of associations are typically complex, involving seemingly contradictory emotions or at times unexpected emotions that emerged during the interview process. Subjects whose associations centered on personal loss described feelings of grief, as well as feelings of calm and positivity. In the words of one subject, their feelings and experiences with the exhibition objects were “bittersweet.”

The theme of *repair and repurpose* resonated strongly with subjects as well. Many spoke about clothes having a “greater purpose” that can be renewed, “lives that can be extended,” or having

* The loss of a loved one, either through separation or death, and affiliated grief is one of the more common human-object associations found throughout the research studies to-date. From a therapeutic point of view, this suggests that objects serving as protagonists of the healing process might be predominant among the psychological underpinnings of inherent human-object dynamic relationships, and should also be noted as an area of focus for future investigation.

possibilities for the future. In these instances, the objects that showed wear yet were saved and displayed were meaningful and relatable to subjects, prompting feelings and associations of caretaking and nurturance. Likewise, garments that showed repair or repurposing activated remembrances and feelings of resilience and love from subjects. *Power* also emerged as a theme throughout the interviews. Feelings of power are essential to self-identity and core to psychological health, and it was exciting to see it emerge in this study centered on the topic of clothing. Subjects described feelings and associations of power in various ways, each positive and affirming, personal, and in connection with another individual in their life.

Human Connection

Participants were moved by, and in some cases surprised by, the emotional quality of the personal object stories within the exhibition. *Wearing Memories* was especially powerful for subjects due to the everyday nature of the garments and how relatable the stories were. Overall the attraction to and positive impact of *Fashion Unraveled* were its personal and human aspects:

“I was surprised at my emotions, being sensitive. When I visited, hearing someone’s story, hearing *them*, it was comforting in a way. It was human.” - *Visitor*

“I felt a certain vulnerability (looking at the objects). It was the humanizing aspect, what was and what isn’t anymore.” - *Visitor*

“I remember most the photo of the everyday mother and child going to the fashion show.” - *Visitor*

“These garments are very approachable, not the suit of armor of a finished piece of fashion. They have their day too!” - *Visitor*

“It’s a deep pleasure to reflect. This is about how clothing is meaningful to people which is such a brilliant idea. Clothing has deep significance for people.” - *Visitor*

“*Wearing Memories* is so valuable, evocative, emotional, honest. It’s the opposite of manipulation. It makes me hungry for more. There is something that allows people to share these stories. They are honest without any discomfort. It’s connections.” - *Visitor*

“There is so much hope. People stopped to think about the things that are valuable to them as people, as families.” - *Object Donor*

“It’s a human perspective through clothes. People expressing themselves through their clothes is important to me, not scientific information.” - *Visitor*

“I wanted to see and hear the personal stories of ordinary people.” - *Visitor*

“*Wearing Memories* was the most evocative because it was about the human element, the stories and connections. The value of the object is ultimately about the human information associated with it. The best impacts of museums are human impacts.”
- *Visitor*

“I’ve gone several times – drawn to it because it’s the things you wouldn’t typically showcase. It becomes a personal connection. You want to dive a little deeper.” - *Visitor*

“I felt very much a kind of connection, thinking about the garments that I’ve saved and others have saved. This exhibition really made me think of these things and why I’ve hung onto the things I have. It made me think about others’ clothes and my clothes in a deep way.” - *Visitor*

“A lot of the things I wore growing up were things my grandmother made for my mother, and then saved. There is some kind of DNA in this – my mother, my grandmother and me.” - *Visitor* (brought blouse made by deceased grandmother)

Memory

In every instance where objects were associated with remembrance, subjects spoke about a significant relationship in their lives. Memories appeared to center on loved ones or individuals held in high regard, and – even in the cases involving loss – feelings of positivity:

“The toile patterns reminded me of being a young girl and my grandmother gave me a sewing kit. I remembered the box and it felt sweet in that moment. I need to call my mother and find out about it. I hope it’s still there.” - *Visitor*

“My grandmother gave me this and I love it. I will keep it forever. I don’t agree with her aspirations for me but I love that she thought that of me. It’s a connection with her memory.” - *Visitor* (brought Oxford t shirt)

“The story of the child’s bodice and the whole life of that object just stood out, brought back a lot of memories. I thought so much about death – it was a lot – the death of my father and grandmother.” - *Visitor*

“In Wearing Memories the bodice of the childhood dress really resonated with me. It reminded me of my childhood and similar dresses my sister and I wore. This object really was a work of art.” - *Visitor*

The bias cut dress – it was so loved and preserved and it made me think of my grandmother.” - *Visitor*

“This reminds me of home. I brought it with me when I came to New York. Grandma would take us on day trips and her home was comfort. She played a big part in my growing up. She was quite affectionate.” - *Visitor* (brought deceased grandmother’s winter coat)

“He wore it every day. He passed. I’d never seen it in person, only in photos. How do you properly preserve the memory? I haven’t decided yet.” - *Visitor* (brought deceased father’s belt buckle)

“This is my mother’s engagement ring. She loved it and it’s very meaningful to me. It reminds me of her: fun loving and eccentric and an authentic, beautiful person. I never take it off.” - *Visitor* (brought deceased mother’s engagement ring)

“The Asian garment stood out. It reminded me of a friend who makes clothing of her own. I could immediately connect with her and share it with her.” - *Visitor*

“Memory fascinates me. Inspiration starts with memory for me. The mother and daughter bodice story made me think of my mother and my aunt who made clothes for me. I’ve been feeling a lack of inspiration and the bodice story and sharing of that memory brought me there.” - *Visitor*

“Clothes are an important aspect in life because of the stories. The philosophy of the exhibition about memory is important to me and in my work.” - *Object Donor*

Repair and Repurposing

The theme of repair and repurpose came up often throughout the interviews. As with each emergent theme, the repair and repurposing of garments was directly linked with the human element and reflected deeper meanings of care and nurturance:

“The objects in the exhibition made me think of caring and repairing. I could get more life out of the things I own. Care taking is something I get better at as I get older – you’ve got to show up, you have to take care.” - *Visitor*

“Clothing and materials are valuable and purposeful – seeing how they go from generation to generation. Seeing hands and making family connections – it’s all about transformation.” - *Object Donor*

“The objects in the exhibition made me think of caring and repairing. I could get more life out of the things I own. Care taking is something I get better at as I get older – you’ve got to show up, you have to take care.” - *Visitor*

“I thought about all of the repurposing and reworking in the exhibition and the meaning of that.” - *Visitor*

“I remember mostly the garments that have been changed over time. One of the garments has been modified many times over the years. It really is emotional.” - *Visitor*

“I felt nostalgic. The unfinished and reworked things were most memorable and meaningful. They show care and appreciation of craft. Now it’s trendy to repurpose but I know it as a necessity – before it became recycling.” - *Visitor*

Feelings of Power

Feelings of power are primary and essential in human development. Power is a core element of self, resilience and endurance, differentiation, formation of self-identity, and is instrumental throughout the necessary discomforts of the process of personal growth. It is exciting when power emerges in relationship to object association and experience, and several meaningful examples were provided within our interviews. Subjects’ descriptions of power affiliated with their object experiences were poignant, and seemingly unique to the intimacy of the type of object shared. Power was at times literally referenced, and at times indicated via descriptions of feeling bold, defiant or impervious to judgment:

“This was his symbol of power. He wore it every day and it would have made him feel powerful. It was like his shield of armor.” - *Visitor* (brought deceased father’s belt buckle)

“Luxury is not the thing that is expensive but the thing that has power.” - *Visitor*

“It’s a symbol of what I feel comfortable in and not what people think of me. I am comfortable with me.” - *Visitor* (brought deceased grandmother’s winter coat)

“This makes me think of strength. Total confidence. I have a little bit of that in me too – I feel a little pride.” - *Visitor* (brought deceased father’s ski pinny)

“I was touched by the vest that the woman wore to a formal event as an act of defiance. It reminded me of the aids quilt.” - *Visitor*

“They are very empowering. Sometimes I wear all three or one or another depending on how I feel or what I need and it’s like choosing who I want to be with me.” - *Visitor*
(brought three bracelets representing different people in her life)

Overall, the information gathered shaped a portrait of the exhibition and object experience as one of introspection and highly individual, quiet, personal associations and reflections. The exhibition’s environmental experience was passive, nevertheless, specific objects and stories activated moderate-to-strong emotional responses, particularly upon reflection over time. Subjects who brought personal objects of their own did so seamlessly within the context of the messages of the exhibition and in resonance with the every day items presented in *Wearing Memories*. Consistent with the qualitative study’s 97 respondents to-date, exhibition object meanings and their importance to subjects were highly subjective, contextual, associative, and unrelated to monetary or material value. Within this context, illustrative examples of all seven Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics were identified and are presented in the Collected Data and Synthesis sections of this paper.

Subject Recruitment and Protection

On behalf of the research team the institution sent out a voluntary call via email to a prospective interview population. The researchers prepared a letter of invitation for selected individuals whom the museum determined would be willing and valuable to the purposes of the study (see Appendix A). Each participant was introduced to the inquiry, its purpose, and to the questions so as to make an informed decision. In keeping with NIH Human Subject Research specifications, participants provided consent prior to the interviews. No identifying information was collected or requested of the participants, and consent was also received for audio recording of the interviews.

Methodology

Between the dates of August 18th – 23th 2018, 13 in-depth interviews were conducted in a private office on campus with 12 post-visit audience members and one exhibition object contributor. Performing the interviews on site were Brenda Cowan, Associate Professor of Exhibition & Experience Design, School of Graduate Studies at SUNY/FIT, Ross Laird, PhD, Interdisciplinary Creative Process, MA, Counseling Psychology, faculty Kwantlyn Polytechnic University, and Jason McKeown MS, LMFT, CPE, DCC, Director of Clinical and Family Services Trails Carolina. Data analysis was subsequently conducted and the information synthesized into this report document by Brenda Cowan with Graduate Associate Melisa Delibegovic.

The interviews utilized a script instrument designed specifically for post-visit audience members (see Appendix A). The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in length. The differences in interview duration were due to the personal manner in which individual participants answered each question and the amount of information they were willing or able to share. The scripts and interview protocols utilized the same methodology and questions as used in the previous case studies to ensure consistency and control with data collection.

Collected Data

The following information is organized in order of the interview questions asked. The most representative responses to each question have been selected from among the data and presented below via defining and qualifying quotes and/or anecdotes.

Post-Visit Audience Interview Questions

(13 subjects, including 1 who is also an object donor)

What draws you to museums in general and this exhibition in particular?

Subjects who were already familiar with the museum were interested in what they determined was a new and interesting approach:

“I’ve gone several times – drawn to it – it’s the things they wouldn’t typically showcase. It becomes a personal connection.”

“This is totally different for the museum to create and I wanted to see what they would do with it. *Wearing Memories* in particular because of the stories.”

“It’s a focus that I’d like to see more of. Any opportunity where there is an elevation of that subject matter (personal clothing narratives) is great.”

The subject of memory was a specific draw:

“The philosophy of the exhibition about memory is important to me and in my work.”

“The content of memory fascinates me. I went because of that specifically.”

“Curiosity about how the subject would be presented.”

The subject of clothing/fashion was also a specific draw:

“It’s a human perspective through clothes. Clothes give you an energy subconsciously, and the exhibition allows you to experience that.”

“I have a significant personal and professional interest – many layers for me as a visitor. Clothing exhibitions are a swirl of many different pleasures.”

“I’m a museum professional and have a lifetime interest in museums. I have an interest in fashion exhibitions, especially when the objects are surprising and exciting.”

“I discovered them (museums) in my late teens and it was a revelation: quiet, beautiful, monumental. *Fashion Unraveled* is a very intellectual exhibition. You think about what the designer was thinking, about clothing in relationship to creativity.”

Some subjects saw the exhibition as an opportunity for personal exploration:

“I never thought about why I hang onto things and it was an opportunity for me to learn more.”

“I was curious. I’m interested in the associations a person makes with objects.”

What content or emotions did you anticipate experiencing during your visit?

Most subjects didn’t have preconceived notions or expectations before attending the exhibition. Those who did think about their visit beforehand expected an emotional element of some type:

“I didn’t have an idea of what I would see. I anticipated seeing and hearing stories. I was even a little nervous because you don’t know what’s going to be shared – not knowing if something is going to be prompted.”

“I had a degree of skepticism – such a small space with a very big and meaningful topic. *Wearing Memories* was a real reset. Seeing it right up front counterbalanced my mind and attitude.”

“I anticipated being touched by personal stories. That’s new for this museum.”

“I was surprised at the emotions – being sensitive.”

“I expected the historical content and visual aspects. I wanted to experience the evocative – the value of an object is its connection to a relationship.”

“I had a sense, but it was beyond my expectations because of the stories.”

What do you remember most about the objects that you saw?

Objects with strong personal stories were the most remembered, particularly those that activated personal memory:

“In *Wearing Memories*, the bodice of the childhood dress really resonated with me. It reminded me of my childhood and the dresses my sister and I wore.”

“The *Wearing Memories* mother and daughter bodice story. It made me think about my mother and my aunt who made clothes for me.”

“The story of the child’s bodice and the mother giving it to her daughter. The texture of that fabric brought back a lot of memories and that the daughter put it in a box for display and gave it back to her. I thought about if I could ever do that.”

“The vest that a woman wore to a formal event as an act of defiance. It made me think of the AIDS quilt.”

Clothes that showed hand craftwork and the process of making were also impactful:

“The designer pieces are so cold yet the crazy quilt – the hand, the individual story is so apparent in the quilt and robe. They are literally warm.”

“The process pieces stood out to me. I tend to think of results, so thinking of process was important to me.”

Items that made visitors think of “being loved” or of “life” were resonant:

“The oriental style jacket and skirt – my deep connection. It’s living history, both on its own and related to my own personal and professional life. Seeing his work was a real surprise! I really wanted to touch that!”

“Mostly the garments that had been changed over time. Objects that were loved, like the paisley scarf.”

The bias cut dress – it was so loved and preserved and it made me think of my grandmother.”

“The *Wearing Memories* sweater vest and how much it was loved and worn and it really resonated with me.”

Describe the impact that those objects had on you.

Introspection and personal connection were described most frequently:

“I found inspiration in *Wearing Memories*. I’ve been feeling a lack of inspiration and the bodice story and the sharing of that memory brought me there.”

“I felt very much a kind of connection. Thinking about the garments that I’ve saved and that others have saved. The exhibition really made me think of these things and my things and why I’ve hung onto the things that I have. It made me think about clothes and my clothes in a deep way.”

“It inspired me to be able to create.”

“I thought, there is so much hope. People stopped to think about the things that are valuable to them as people, as families. I connected past, present and future.”

“Nostalgic. The unfinished and reworked things were most memorable and meaningful. They show care and appreciation of craft.”

“It’s a deep pleasure to reflect – it’s something I do. This is about how clothing is meaningful to people which is such a brilliant idea.”

Several of which had powerful emotional components:

“I thought so much about death. My own death – it was a lot. I thought about the death of my father and my grandmother.”

“I felt a certain vulnerability. It was the humanizing aspect. What was and what isn’t anymore. You are intrigued and want to know more and there isn’t anymore, it’s lost.”

“I felt so ungrateful that I was so cavalier and didn’t preserve anything from my grandmother. I had things and used them but never saved them. It was a bit of a reaction against my mother who saved things and I wasn’t going to be like that.”

“I was taken by people who had a strong connection to family and I felt envy.”

Have you had any thoughts or feelings as a result of your exhibition experience at the museum?

Several subjects reflected on process-related objects in the show and in their own lives in various ways:

“I thought about the knits. They are special because I think of my aunt knitting and the making and it was amazing to watch. I could tell how she loved us. It’s such a warm feeling. It’s why I still love that wine color (of sweater she knitted).”

“I think about process-based work. There is something to it – there is a story behind it. Current fashion is so fast and the muslin process just slows things down. There is a rawness to it – human aspect – these garments are very approachable, not the suit of armor of a finished piece of fashion. They have their day too!”

“I am in the middle of moving and so much of what I am experiencing in my life is about letting go – about choices. I thought of all the repurposing and reworking in the exhibition and the meaning of that.”

“The process of my aunt dying. She left a crazy quilt and my sister and I fought over it – didn’t talk for almost a year. I took it but then I experienced a release, a letting go, and gave it to her. Now she has the responsibility. Just now I got the idea – based on the quilt garment in the show – to give her a positive idea to care for it. I think this idea – the connection of the clothing triggering the solution to share with my sister. I can help solve the problem maybe (how to care for the quilt) and allow the object to live on. It’s a healing idea. It could change our relationship in a good way.”

Broader humanistic thoughts and deep personal introspection were also prompted:

“I was thinking about what I would wear when I die, and how I don’t have an answer because I need more life experiences to learn who I am – to know how my clothes will resonate with me.”

“*Wearing Memories* is so valuable, evocative, honest. It’s the opposite of manipulation. It makes me hungry for more. There is something there that allows people to share those stories. They are honest without discomfort. It’s connections. A shared community experience.”

“I thought about the progression of the stories. I crafted my own life through that progression. I thought so much about matriarchy.”

“The best impacts of museums are human impacts.”

“I appreciated the common approach to the philosophy (of memory).”

“You don’t need piles of things just less things with more meaning. The exhibition made me think of caring and repairing. I could get more life out of the things that I own. Caretaking is something I get better at as I get older – you have to show up, you have to take care.”

(If brought object) Share with us your thoughts or associations about your object.

Most of the subjects shared a personal object as part of their interview. Several of the objects were gifts and their stories focused on the deep meaning of those relationships:

“I have a sweater (at home) my mom gave to me when I was in my 20’s. It’s the first time I got something expensive and my mom surprised me. This wasn’t expected. My mom wasn’t expressive to me but this was so special. We bought it together.”

“My grandmother gave me this (Oxford t shirt) and I love it. (Touches and holds while talking about it) I will keep it forever. I don’t agree with her aspirations for me but I love that she thought that of me. It’s a connection with her memory. It’s the texture. It’s soft like her. It’s like touching her hair. When I wear it it feels so soft – like being embraced – and also how something fits. Tight or loose all impacts how you feel. Those kinds of things are in our minds, our psychology.”

“This bracelet (Wears and touches when describing it) is from a dear friend and colleague. It’s empowering.”

Most of the objects were related to personal loss:

“(Holds sweater in arms) This is my father’s sweater. I gave it to him – he was wearing it when he died. I took it off his body and it has hung in my closet ever since. He was a warm, affectionate person and this sweater fits that. The sweater, I could probably throw it away now, Maybe it’s my age and I just feel that it’s ephemeral. I don’t need it. I would give it to Housing Works – he died of aids and they support that. He always said ‘give to the living’.”

“(Places father’s belt buckle on table) You can touch it. So you can fully see it – get it. He wore it every day – he passed – we had the same initials. I’d never seen it in person, only in photos. How do you properly preserve the memory? I haven’t decided yet. It was his symbol of power, his suit of armor. It would have made him feel powerful.”

“This is the ski jersey (pinny) my dad wore. (Places on table and touches throughout description) He used to ski race and he was very competitive. When he died nine years ago I was in the line (viewing) and a friend of his came up to me and handed it to me. I think he had intended for me to put it in the coffin but I didn’t. No way. I’m keeping this. This makes me think of his strength, total confidence. I have a little bit of that in me too – I feel a little pride. There is something about the material. It feels old, worn. Like it has a story.”

“My mother’s engagement ring. (Wears and touches while describing it) She loved it and it’s very meaningful to me. When she gave it to me – it reminds me of her: fun loving and eccentric, an authentic and beautiful person. I never take it off.”

“(Holds coat in arms) I brought it over from Derby (grandmother’s coat) and it reminds me of home. Grandma would take us on day trips. Her home was comfort. They (grandparents) played a big part in my growing up – quite affectionate. People will ask about it and I can share the story about it.”

“(Holds and touches blouse) This is the top my grandmother made for my mother. Now I have it and I wore it in my 20’s. A lot of things I wore growing up were things my grandmother made and mother wore, and she (grandmother) saved. I save this in my “important things” box. There is some kind of shared DNA in this: my mother, grandmother and me.”

Other objects had specific relationship to a time and place, and bear the characteristics of Bearing Witness:

“(Wearing watch) It was a spur of the moment purchase. I was frustrated at the time by my broken computer and I went with the intent to buy something analogue! (Later on) Serendipity, a colleague I came to learn had bought the same one and now I also think of her which enriches it.”

“This bracelet (Wears and touches when describing it) I bought 20 years ago at a craft fair in Massachusetts with my husband. It’s almost a sacred place in my life and my marriage. I wear it every day.”

And Life Companions:

“I have jeans (at home) important to me. Like you have a spouse that stands alongside you for life. This object is like that. I will keep them forever.”

Data Demonstrating the Theory of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics

Data collected among 13 individuals presented evidence of the tenets of the Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics as follows:

Touching (10/13 respondents)

Giving/Receiving (8/13 respondents)

Associating (7/13 respondents)

Making (5/13 respondents)

Releasing/Unburdening (4/13 respondents)

Composing (3/13 respondents)

Synergizing (2/13 respondents)

Data includes demonstrations of a Dynamic occurring during the interview, descriptions by subjects of engaging in a Dynamic, and/or reference made to a Dynamic while within the passive exhibition environment:

Giving/Receiving

“A dear friend gave me a piano that had been given to her by her father. When she (friend) died she gave it to me. Since then I have learned the history of it – the history is embedded in it.”

“I have a sweater (at home) my mom gave to me when I was in my 20’s. It’s the first time I got something expensive and my mom surprised me. This wasn’t expected. My mom wasn’t expressive to me but this was so special. We bought it together.”

“My grandmother gave me this (Oxford t shirt) and I love it. (Touches and holds while talking about it) I will keep it forever. I don’t agree with her aspirations for me but I love that she thought that of me. It’s a connection with her memory.”

“This bracelet (Wears and touches when describing it) is from a dear friend and colleague. It’s empowering.”

“I gifted the dress to the permanent collection. Donating has been such an honor. My piece fits so well with the theme and now it has a far-reaching purpose.”

“This is the ski jersey (pinny) my dad wore. He used to ski race and he was very competitive. When he died nine years ago I was in the line (viewing) and a friend of his came up to me and handed it to me. I think he had intended for me to put it in the coffin but I didn’t. No way. I’m keeping this.”

“The story of the child’s bodice (*Wearing Memories*) and the mother giving it to her daughter. The texture of that fabric brought back a lot of memories and that the daughter put it in a box for display and gave it back to her mother. I thought about if I could ever do that.”

“I wear this Tinkerbell necklace from my grandmother everywhere I go. It’s about remembering her and I feel like she is still with me helping me.”

Associating

“This is the top my grandmother made for my mother. Now I have it and I wore it in my 20’s. A lot of things I wore growing up were things my grandmother made and mother wore, and she (grandmother) saved. I save this in my “important things” box. There is some kind of shared DNA in this: my mother, grandmother and me.”

“I have jeans (at home) important to me. Like you have a spouse that stands alongside you for life. This object is like that. I will keep them forever.”

“My mother’s engagement ring. (Wears and touches while describing it) She loved it and it’s very meaningful to me. When she gave it to me – it reminds me of her: fun loving and eccentric, an authentic and beautiful person. I never take it off.”

“This is the ski jersey (pinny) my dad wore. He used to ski race and he was very competitive. When he died nine years ago I was in the line (viewing) and a friend of his came up to me and handed it to me. I think he had intended for me to put it in the coffin but I didn’t. No way. I’m keeping this.”

“This bracelet (Wears and touches when describing it) I bought 20 years ago at a craft fair in Massachusetts with my husband. It’s almost a sacred place in my life and my marriage. I wear it every day.”

“I wear this Tinkerbell necklace from my grandmother everywhere I go. It’s about remembering her and I feel like she is still with me helping me.”

“He wore it every day – he passed – we had the same initials. I’d never seen it in person, only in photos. How do you properly preserve the memory? I haven’t decided yet.”

Making

“The making of the dress was exhausting and the lace has a history. Everything is hand draped and hand embroidered. My hand and the hands of the other artisans who work with me – it’s very important to honor that.”

“I thought about the knits. They are special because I think of my aunt knitting and the making and it was amazing to watch. I could tell how she loved us. It’s such a warm feeling.”

“It inspired me to be able to create.”

“The process pieces stood out to me. I tend to think of results, so thinking of process was important to me.”

“The unfinished and reworked things were most memorable and meaningful. They show care and appreciation of craft.”

Touching

Touching was demonstrated by all ten subjects that brought in an object to share. In addition, several subjects spoke specifically about touch when telling the object’s story:

“(Places father’s belt buckle on table) You can touch it. So you can fully see it – get it. He wore it every day – he passed – we had the same initials. I’d never seen it in person, only in photos. How do you properly preserve the memory? I haven’t decided yet. I was his symbol of power, his suit of armor. It would have made him feel powerful.”

“My grandmother gave me this (Oxford t shirt) and I love it. (Touches and holds while talking about it) I will keep it forever. I don’t agree with her aspirations for me but I love that she thought that of me. It’s a connection with her memory. It’s the texture. It’s soft like her. It’s like touching her hair. When I wear it it feels so soft – like being embraced _ and also how something fits. Tight or loose all impacts how you feel. Those kinds of things are in our minds, our psychology.”

“There is something about the material. It feels old, worn. Like it has a story.” (Father’s ski pinny)

“I brought it over from Derby (grandmother’s coat) and it reminds me of home. Her home was comfort. They (grandparents) played a big part in my growing up – quite affectionate. I do wear it. It envelops me, keeps me warm. Like she did.”

“His sweater is warm. It hugs me.” (Father’s sweater)

Releasing/Unburdening

“The process of my aunt dying. She left a crazy quilt and my sister and I fought over it – didn’t talk for almost a year. I took it but then I experienced a release, a letting go, and gave it to her. Now she has the responsibility.”

“This is my father’s sweater. I gave it to him – he was wearing it when he died. I took it off his body and it has hung in my closet ever since. He was a warm, affectionate person and this sweater fits that. The sweater, I could probably throw it away now, Maybe it’s my age and I just feel that it’s ephemeral. I don’t need it. I would give it to Housing Works – he died of aids and they support that. He always said ‘give to the living’.”

“I am in the middle of moving and so much of what I am experiencing in my life is about letting go – about choices.”

“I held onto a rolodex card of his – I called him all the time. But I finally threw it out. It just seemed ridiculous to keep it.”

Composing

“They (three bracelets) are very empowering. Sometimes I wear all three or one or another depending on how I feel or what I need and it’s like choosing who I want to be with me.”

“Things that stopped me were the unexpected juxtapositions, like the paisley shawl and the suit. The surprising juxtaposition was interesting, it enabled me to create a story.”

“There is a tension among the juxtaposition of the objects in that display because some of the items are “high fashion” but supposed to be humble. The other two pieces don’t get the acclaim that the sock sweater does. I am manipulated by the display. I feel befuddled that some things are given the attention and acclaim but why not others?”

Synergizing

“There is something there that allows people to share those stories. They are honest without discomfort. It’s connections. A shared community experience.”

“The sense of mood and energy between the objects is important. The objects have organic relationships – it was like a forest. The pieces all had a shared energy, a synergy.”

Synthesis

The following information delineates the meaning of each dynamic and includes illustrative examples for each, drawn from all research work to-date including the initial field research study with Trails Carolina and Ross Laird, the National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study, the War Childhood Museum case study, the Derby Museums case study and the Museum at FIT case study.

Releasing/Unburdening

Definition: The action of releasing an object from a state of highly associative ownership into another place or state with the intent of entirely and permanently removing it from its former association (meaning) and state of ownership.

The Object Characteristics found within the examples of Releasing/Unburdening include:

- Bearing Witness (Hoskins)
- Unified Experience (Latham, Wood)
- Life Companions (Turkle)
- Critical Proximity (Morris)

The healthful/healing attributes of Releasing/Unburdening include:

- Resilience
- Containment
- Stabilization
- Mindfulness
- Self-regulation
- Self-efficacy
- Empathy

Examples that illustrate this dynamic and its healthful/healing impact include:

- Students carrying Burden Rocks of personal grief (Trails Carolina)
- Widow who burned her late husband's blood-covered wallet in fire pit. (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Widow who donated her late husband's cellphone, watch, suspenders, dollar bills and soccer ball (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Survivor who donated work ID card and bank cards from wallet. (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Widow donated late husband's tie and gun. (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Donated hospital discharge form and photo of self as young child (War Childhood Museum)

- Donated handmade cookbook/journal (War Childhood Museum)
- Visitor consideration of object donor experience (War Childhood Museum)
- Donated handmade humanitarian aid doll (War Childhood Museum)
- Grandmother sneaking into grandfather's photos to throw them away (Derby Museum)
- Grandmother's quilt: "I took it but then I experienced a release, a letting go, and gave it to her. Now she has the responsibility." (Museum at FIT)
- Father's sweater: "I could probably throw it away now, Maybe it's my age and I just feel that it's ephemeral. I don't need it. I would give it to Housing Works – he died of aids and they support that. He always said 'give to the living'." (Museum at FIT)
- "I am in the middle of moving and so much of what I am experiencing in my life is about letting go – about choices." (Museum at FIT)
- "I held onto a rolodex card of his – I called him all the time. But I finally threw it out. It just seemed ridiculous to keep it." (Museum at FIT)

Giving/Receiving

Definition: The action of donating or offering to another person or people an object with the intention of its being accepted, and the resultant act of its being received with its attributed meaning being mutually understood and held intact.

The Object Characteristics found within the examples of Giving/Receiving include:

- Bearing Witness (Hoskins)
- Life Companions (Turkle)
- Provocations of Thought (Turkle)
- Unified Experience (Latham, Wood)

The healthful/healing attributes of Giving/Receiving include:

- Resilience
- Stabilization
- Connection with family/society
- Perspective-making
- Trauma recovery

Examples that illustrate the dynamic and its healthful/healing impact:

- Phase achievement beads (Trails Carolina)
- Widow donated deceased husband's wine to Memorial and Museum and her relatives. (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- First responder whose object wasn't accepted into a different institution's collection. (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Donated collection of chocolate candy wrappers (War Childhood Museum)

- Donated eyeglasses (War Childhood Museum)
- Donated food wrappers and brother's flak jacket (War Childhood Museum)
- Donated Wax Apple (War Childhood Museum)
- Ceramic cat from father to be passed on to niece (Derby Museum)
- WWII medals and diary (Derby Museum)
- Collection of jewelry from children and grandchildren (Derby Museum)
- Camera from father and camera from widow of friend (Derby Museum)
- Celtic amulet from mentor (Derby Museum)
- Bracelets from art fellows and bracelet from family (Derby Museum)
- Subject's box of family photographs from which his father would gift photos to his aunts (Derby Museum)
- Planning to pass along the family totem (Derby Museum)
- Gift of Genesh statue from parents (Derby Museum)
- "A dear friend gave me a piano that had been given to her by her father. When she (friend) died she gave it to me." (Museum at FIT)
- "I have a sweater (at home) my mom gave to me when I was in my 20's." (Museum at FIT)
- "My grandmother gave me this (Oxford t shirt) and I love it." (Museum at FIT)
- "This bracelet is from a dear friend and colleague. It's empowering." (Museum at FIT)
- "I gifted the dress to the permanent collection." (Museum at FIT)
- Ski pinny: "When he died nine years ago I was in the line (viewing) and a friend of his came up to me and handed it to me. I'm keeping this." (Museum at FIT)
- "The story of the child's bodice and the mother giving it to her daughter. The daughter put it in a box for display and gave it back to her mother." (Museum at FIT)
- "I wear this Tinkerbell necklace from my grandmother everywhere I go." (Museum at FIT)

Composing

Definition: The action of bringing together and juxtaposing objects with the intent of forming and expressing a concept or idea in order to coalesce, examine and convey a meaning that cannot otherwise be fully or entirely explained or expressed to its fullest capacity.

The Object Characteristics found within the examples of Composing include:

- Bearing Witness (Hoskins)
- Unified Experience (Latham, Wood)
- Perrisological Resonators (Lemmonier)
- Provocations of Thought (Turkle)

The healthful/healing attributes of Composing include:

Mindfulness
Self expression and communication
Connection with society
Self-awareness
Self-identity
Containment

Examples that illustrate the dynamic and its healthful/healing impact:

- Students constructing found object labyrinths (Trails Carolina)
- Survivor who donated series of items that were with him on the 90th floor through his escape and eventual release from medical care (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- First responder donated boots and uniform (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Dual survivor and widow's home shrine with medal and late husband's objects in a curio box. (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Widow donated dogtags and binder outlining safety plans for the World Trade Center. (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Mother who donated deceased son's equestrian ribbons and memorabilia. (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Donated hospital discharge form and photo of self as a child (War Childhood Museum)
- Two cameras positioned with lenses touching (Derby Museum)
- Family photos in tin (Derby Museum)
- Wearing collection of jewelry from grandchildren and children (Derby Museum)
- Grandmother's glassware always kept together (Derby Museum)
- Two bracelets always together (Derby Museum)
- Charm bracelet always in Japanese bag (Derby Museum)
- WWII medals, stones, diary always kept together (Derby Museum)
- Pill box and thimble always kept near each other (Derby Museum)
- Three bracelets. (Museum at FIT)
- Within the exhibition: "unexpected juxtapositions, like the paisley shawl and the suit." (Museum at FIT)
- Within the exhibition: "There is a tension among the juxtaposition of the objects in that display because some of the items are "high fashion" but supposed to be humble. The other two pieces don't get the acclaim that the sock sweater does." (Museum at FIT)

Associating

Definition: The action of maintaining and keeping within close physical proximity to an object in an effort to perpetuate the knowledge/memory of the object's attributed associations including experiences, states of being, places and people.

The Object Characteristics found within the examples of Associating include:

- Bearing Witness (Hoskins)
- Unified Experience (Latham, Wood)
- Life Companions (Turkle)
- Critical Proximity (Morris)

The healthful/healing attributes of Associating include:

- Self-identity
- Self-regulation
- Mindfulness
- Mindset
- Trauma recovery
- Self-efficacy

Examples that illustrate the dynamic and its healthful/healing impact:

- Students naming, labeling and marking their bows (Trails Carolina)
- Students taking home dirty and worn mountain clothing (Trails Carolina)
- First responder continuously carries a piece of steel from the site in his pocket, (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Survivor's burned and damaged contents from wallet (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Donated handmade humanitarian aid doll (War Childhood Museum)
- Donated grandfather's books (War Childhood Museum)
- Bracelet carried in purse next to money (Derby Museum)
- Tin with photos in living room (Derby Museum)
- Glass pig statue on shelf (Derby Museum)
- Knit blanket under pillow (Derby Museum)
- Pill box and thimble seen every day (Derby Museum)
- Ethiopian flag on bedroom wall (Derby Museum)
- Father's camera on bookcase (Derby Museum)
- Road atlas kept in car (Derby Museum)
- Wear Celtic amulet every day (Derby Museum)
- Wears string bracelet every day, on right wrist (Derby Museum)
- Carries family photograph in purse every day (Derby Museum)
- Carries photograph with grandfather in purse every day (Derby Museum)
- Lion totem on wall in living room (Derby Museum)
- Ceramic cat on bedroom shelf (Derby Museum)
- Glasgow School of Art memorial pin will wear every day (Derby Museum)

- “This is the top my grandmother made for my mother. Now I have it and I wore it in my 20’s. I save this in my “important things” box. There is some kind of shared DNA in this: my mother, grandmother and me.” (Museum at FIT)
- “I have jeans important to me. Like you have a spouse that stands alongside you for life. This object is like that. I will keep them forever.” (Museum at FIT)
- “My mother’s engagement ring. I never take it off.” (Museum at FIT)
- Father’s ski pinny: “When he died nine years ago I was in the line (viewing) and a friend of his came up to me and handed it to me. I think he had intended for me to put it in the coffin but I didn’t. No way. I’m keeping this.” (Museum at FIT)
- “This bracelet I bought 20 years ago at a craft fair in Massachusetts with my husband. I wear it every day.” (Museum at FIT)
- “I wear this Tinkerbelle necklace from my grandmother everywhere I go. It’s about remembering her and I feel like she is still with me helping me.” (Museum at FIT)
- “He wore it every day. How do you properly preserve the memory? I haven’t decided yet.” (Museum at FIT)

Making

Definition: The action of generating an original or newly formed object as a means of experiencing and implementing the fundamental creative process, therein undergoing the progressive stages of therapeutic growth and healing.

The Object Characteristics found within the examples of Making include:

- Unified Experience (Latham, Wood)
- The Transpersonal (Salom)
- Perrisological Resonators (Lemmonier)
- Materiality (Dudley)
- Primal Power (Nguyen)

The healthful/healing attributes of Making include:

- Self awareness
- Self-regulation
- Stabilization
- Mindfulness
- Emotional Grit
- Resilience
- Containment

Examples that illustrate the dynamic and its healthful/healing impact:

- Bow drilling (Trails Carolina)

- Journalist's four books subsequent to the event (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Donated handmade cookbook/journal (War Childhood Museum)
- Donated class photo/school diploma/cookbook (War Childhood Museum)
- Donated student-made school magazine (War Childhood Museum)
- Volunteer went home and wrote a poem inspired by her object experience (Derby Museum)
- Taking photographs with father's camera (Derby Museum)
- Making ring (Derby Museum)
- Made box for children's hair clippings (Derby Museum)
- Making and decorating the cake (Derby Museum)
- Plaster mold made in childhood (Derby Museum)
- "The making of the dress was exhausting and the lace has a history. Everything is hand draped and hand embroidered. My hand and the hands of the other artisans who work with me." (Museum at FIT)
- "I thought about the knits. They are special because I think of my aunt knitting and the making and it was amazing to watch." (Museum at FIT)
- The exhibition: "It inspired me to be able to create." (Museum at FIT)
- "The process pieces stood out to me. I tend to think of results, so thinking of process was important to me." (Museum at FIT)
- "The unfinished and reworked things were most memorable and meaningful. They show care and appreciation of craft." (Museum at FIT)

Synergizing

Definition: The action of contributing an object to a collective whose components produce a meaning greater than the individual's alone.

The Object Characteristics found within the examples of Synergizing include:

- Bearing Witness (Hoskins)
- Unified Experience (Latham, Wood)
- Life Companions (Turkle)
- Critical Proximity (Morris)
- The Transpersonal (Salom)
- Provocations of Thought (Turkle)

The healthful/healing attributes of Synergizing include:

- Perspective Making
- Connection with Society
- Stabilization

Mindfulness
Empathy
Resilience
Endurance
Wholism

Examples that illustrate the dynamic and its healthful/healing impact:

- Journalist's press badge and triage tag (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Donated hospital discharge form and photo of self as a child (War Childhood Museum)
- Donated Student-made school magazine (War Childhood Museum)
- Donated class photo/cookbook/diploma (War Childhood Museum)
- Donated Handmade cookbook/journal (War Childhood Museum)
- Visitor consideration of object-donor experience (War Childhood Museum)
- Visitor working with war refugees (War Childhood Museum)
- Donated handmade humanitarian aid doll (War Childhood Museum)
- Donated food wrappers and brother's flak jacket (War Childhood Museum)
- Donated wax apple (War Childhood Museum)
- Donated collection of chocolate candy wrappers (War Childhood Museum)
- Donated bicycle/ humanitarian aid box/drawings (War Childhood Museum)
- Collections objects being gathered into larger collection (Derby Museum)
- Working at museum and contributing to "Objects of Love" improves life (Derby Museum)
- Objects together in the exhibition illustrating "A shared community experience." (Museum at FIT)
- Objects together in the exhibition illustrating "A sense of mood and energy. A synergy." (Museum at FIT)

Touching

The action of touching an object either consciously or unconsciously when thinking or speaking about its meaning.

Object Characteristics

Hypnoglyph (Critchley)

Materiality (Dudley)

Perrisological Resonators (Lemmonier)

Unity of the Moment (Latham and Wood)

Primal Power (Nguyen)

Healthful/Healing Attributes

Resilience

Endurance

Wholism

Stabilization

Mindfulness

Emotional grit

Containment

Self-regulation

Examples that illustrate the dynamic and its healthful/healing impact:

- Parent using steel striker (Trails Carolina)
- Husband's hand carved top rock (Trails Carolina)
- Survivor who carries steel remnant in his pocket (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum)
- Widow touching the necklace from her husband while interviewing (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum)
- Visitors wanting to touch steel from the towers on display in museum (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum)
- Visitors touching children's dresses and flack jacket out on display (War Childhood Museum)
- Woman touches and holds her necklace covering cancer scar during her interview (Derby Museums)
- Woman describes touching and holding special collection of buttons she now keeps in a tin when recovering from sickness as a child (Derby Museums)
- Preparator describes holding artifacts and feeling like it's Christmas every day (Derby Museums)
- Woman describes how she likes the feeling of security that comes from digging her fingers into knit blanket from childhood (Derby Museums)
- Woman describes spinning grandmother's fragile glass sculpture with permission and pleasure (Derby Museums)
- Curator describes rapture that comes when touching clay artifact and feeling the finger impressions of its maker (Derby Museums)
- Preparator also describes pleasure of touching the same clay artifact and the impressions of the maker's fingers (Derby Museums)
- Man describes holding crude stone tool as prompting wonder and a feeling of history (Derby Museums)
- Man touches road atlas when describing its meaning and says it's like touching the country (Derby Museums)
- Father's belt buckle: "You can touch it. So you can fully see it – get it." (Museum at FIT)

- Oxford t shirt: “It’s the texture. It’s soft like her. It’s like touching her hair. When I wear it it feels so soft – like being embraced _ and also how something fits. Tight or loose all impacts how you feel. Those kinds of things are in our minds, our psychology.” (Museum at FIT)
- “There is something about the material. It feels old, worn. Like it has a story.” (Father’s ski pinny) (Museum at FIT)
- Grandmother’s coat: “I do wear it. It envelops me, keeps me warm. Like she did.” (Museum at FIT)
- Father’s sweater: “His sweater is warm. It hugs me.” (Museum at FIT)

Implications and Next Steps

Further Research

The findings of the first five phases of research warrant a continuation of empirical and applied work. Continued studies will continue to identify broad-spectrum findings, from healing to wellbeing, and across a highly diverse demographic.

Applications

Publication for Routledge, Taylor & Francis, Division of Museum & Heritage Studies and Information Sciences

An academic text is currently underway that will present the entirety of the theory, its origins and empirical work, the final framework and its role within the bodies of scholarship in object and museum studies, exhibition design, and psychotherapy. Models for practice in both the museum and therapeutic professions will also be articulated.

Evaluation Instrument

The Therapeutic Object Dynamics framework is an effective evaluative instrument for an institution to measure the healing, healthful and wellbeing impacts and outcomes of their exhibitions.

Exhibition Development

The Therapeutic Object Dynamics could be utilized as a strategic methodology for the co-creation of an exhibition(s) with the intent of providing healthful and healing opportunities and outcomes for museum staff, audiences and community constituencies. A conversation is currently underway with the Happy Museum consortium in the UK regarding a large scale applied project.

Applied exhibition strategies include an environment that actively changes over time as a result of audience engagement: open source collecting and contributing (Synergizing; Releasing/Unburdening); design that encourages composing and re-composing exhibits (Composing); creative activity spaces (Making) and opportunities for reciprocity within the space (Giving/Receiving). (Touching) would be inherent within all of the exhibition spaces and could also be a specific gallery unto itself.

Appendix A

Invitation to Participate

August, 2018

Dear Friend of the Museum,

As someone who visited the *Fashion Unraveled* exhibition at The Museum at FIT, we would like to extend a personal invitation to you to participate in a research study about your experience.

The purpose of this study is to learn about the reasons why you chose to visit the exhibition, what the content of the exhibition meant to you, and what your feelings are following the time of your visit. The exhibition includes submissions to a crowd-sourced project titled *Wearing Memories*, which highlights images of personal and meaningful items of clothing contributed through an open invitation. Your associations resulting from this exhibit are of particular interest to our study. The researchers leading the project are experts in museum studies and object-based therapy, and we hope to learn whether the experience of visiting MFIT and seeing its objects has had a healthful impact on its visitors. Your input will help museums and institutions that collect and display objects learn why and how objects are meaningful to people, and the psychological community would gain valuable insight into the healing and wellbeing impacts of object engagement.

We are hoping you would be willing to participate in a private 30-minute long personal interview to be conducted at FIT. The interviews will take place between August 13th – 18th, to be arranged at times most convenient to you, and your private information will not be shared. If you are able to participate, we will provide you with all of the details of what to expect and the questions that will be asked so as to make the experience as clear and comfortable for you as possible. We also welcome you to bring with you an object that is meaningful to you as you reflect upon your exhibition experience.

As you consider whether to participate and if you would like some initial information about who we are, you can learn about each of us online at:

- Associate Professor Brenda Cowan, Chairperson, Graduate Exhibition Design at SUNY Fashion Institute of Technology, www.fitnyc.edu <http://www.fitnyc.edu/exhibition-design/faculty/brenda-cowan.php>;
- Ross Laird, PhD, Faculty Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Vancouver, British Columbia, Interdisciplinary Creative Process, MA, Counseling Psychology, <http://www.rosslaird.com>;

• Jason McKeown MS, LMFT, CPE, DCC, Director of Clinical and Family Services, Trails Carolina, trails-carolina.com/jason-mckeown

If you are able to participate in the study, please reply to this email so that we may schedule your interview.

The Museum at FIT would like to thank you so much for your consideration, and we hope to include you in this study that aims to help museums and the therapeutic community, and the many people that they serve.

Most Sincerely,

The Museum at FIT

Appendix B

Interview Script

Museum Audience Members Post-Visit

Facilitators: Professor Brenda Cowan, Graduate Exhibition & Experience Design; Ross Laird, PhD, Interdisciplinary Creative Process, MA, Counseling Psychology, faculty Kwantlen Polytechnic University; and Jason McKeown MS, LMFT, CPE, DCC, Director of Clinical and Family Services, Trails Carolina.

- *What draws you to museums in general and this exhibition in particular?*
- *What content or emotions did you anticipate experiencing during your visit?*
- *What do you remember most about the objects that you saw?*
- *Describe the impact that those objects had on you.*
- *Have you had any thoughts or feelings as a result of your exhibition experience?*
- *(If brought object) Share with us your thoughts or associations about your object.*