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Women with dementia and their handbags:

Negotiating identity, privacy and 'home' through material culture

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Abstract

The article analyses the role of handbags in the everyday lives of women with dementia. Drawing on findings from an ESRC funded UK study 'Dementia and Dress', it shows how handbags are significant to supporting the identities of women with dementia as 'biographical' and 'memory' objects, both in terms of the bags themselves, and the objects they contain. This is particularly so during the transition to care homes, where previous aspects of identity and social roles may be lost. Handbags are also significant to making personal or private space within care settings. However, dementia can heighten women's ambivalent relationship to their handbags, which can become a source of anxiety as 'lost objects', or may be viewed as problematic or 'unruly'. Handbags may also be adapted or discarded due to changing bodies, life-styles and the progression of dementia.

Keywords: dementia; material culture; dress; identity; spatiality

Introduction

Handbags occupy a special place in the lives of many women. Freighted with social and personal meaning, they are about much more than the practicalities of life. They are items of fashion, markers of public identity and status. But they are also intensely private. Closely connected to the individual, they contain an assortment of objects designed to provide support in the enactment of self: make up, scarves, identity cards, money, personal photographs, talismans, memory objects. They are spaces that others may not enter without permission, and their privacy and interiority mimics aspects of the female body, so that their secret, private and enclosed character stands as an emblem of the embodied self. In this article we enter this private world of handbags, exploring the ways their use can shed insight on the embodied lives of women with dementia. In doing so we also address the role of material objects in the day to day experiences of people with dementia.

We have argued elsewhere that dress has a role to play in maintenance of the self in dementia (Twigg, 2010; Twigg & Buse, 2013). In this article we focus on a particular aspect of dress – handbags – using it as a lens for understanding how women with dementia negotiate identity, memories, security and privacy through material culture. The article begins by considering the implications of material culture - including clothing - for the everyday lives of people with dementia. It then introduces handbags as a significant yet under-researched aspect of dress, that has implications for the constitution of identity in everyday life, and the ordering

of age, gender, and class. These arguments are developed drawing on qualitative research findings from an ESRC funded UK study 'Dementia and Dress'. Firstly, it is argued that handbags acted as 'memory' and 'biographical' objects for women with dementia, sometimes representing an 'extension of the self' which individuals may be reluctant to discard. We argue that this takes on particular significance during the passage to institutional care, going on to explore how handbags help to retain ontological security during this transition. This is followed by an analysis of how handbags illuminate - and trouble - symbolic and material divisions of public/private in care home settings, and may be utilised to negotiate a private space in this context. The article also explores handbags as 'unruly' spaces, and the ways ambivalent aspects of women's relationship to their handbags may be exacerbated by the progression of the condition. The article concludes by discussing implications for person-centred dementia care, and broader understandings of material culture and later life.

Dementia, clothing and material culture

Within dementia studies there is growing interest in the material context of the condition and the role of objects in sustaining – or failing to sustain – identity and relationships.

Ethnographic research in dementia care settings has shown how material objects can mediate attachments (Stephens, Cheston & Gleeson, 2012) and facilitate interactions and relationships with other residents (Saunders, Medeiros, Doyle, & Mosby, 2012). Jones (2004) argues that we need to recognise the value of objects in maintaining meaningful attachments as dementia progresses, and the world becomes increasingly estranged and unfamiliar. Material objects can help people with dementia maintain connections to past social identities and roles, as well as providing a sense of comfort and security.

The significance of material objects is increasingly recognised and utilised in dementia care practice. A growing number of care homes use dolls to comfort residents (Learner 2013), drawing on evidence for the benefits of 'doll therapy' (Higgins, 2010). The use of objects and images is also central to reminiscence therapy and life-history work, including use of the 'memory boxes' to gather objects which are connected to a person's life (Gulwadi, 2013; Schweitzer, 2005). Such work has shown how objects - including clothes - can be powerful triggers for memory, as the feel, smell and touch of these items have a strong affective dimension, evoking memories of the past (Schweitzer, 2007; Schweitzer et al., 2008).

Dementia, however, can disrupt our embodied way of 'being in the world', including our relationship to material objects. Phinney and Chesla (2003) argue that dementia involves a disruption of the skilled body, so that objects normally used habitually, drawing on pre-reflexive, embodied knowledge, become something we have to stop and think about. Such objects are no longer 'ready at hand', and people with dementia may spend considerable time trying to use and locate objects and equipment. This also applies to clothing and dress; and there is a body of work on functionality and dress that suggests the ability to dress and choose clothing independently becomes increasingly impaired as dementia progresses (e.g. Baldelli, Boiardi, Ferrari, Bianchi & Hunscomb-Bianchi, 2007; Beck, Heacock, Mercer, Walton, & Shook, 1991).

On the other hand, Kontos' (2003, 2004) research suggests that selfhood continues to reside at the level of the body among people with dementia, enacted through habitual embodied gestures, actions and routines. In relation to dress, she gives the example of a woman with dementia carefully placing her string of pearls on top of her bib, enacting her class and gendered identity. Therefore whilst some elements of embodied knowledge appear to be lost as dementia progresses, other elements may remain, and continue to express selfhood at an embodied level.

There is evidence to suggest that clothing can be significant to maintaining embodied personhood. Clothes are central to the expression of identity, both personal and social (Entwistle, 2000; Breward, 2000; Twigg, 2013). They are a key element in the performativity of the self, both expressing the self and acting back on it at a directly bodily level. They signal to the wider social world who a person is and how they should be treated. For people with dementia, maintaining appearance through clothing can be crucial for how they are seen by others, enabling them to avoid the stigma of the dementia patient, marked by neglect and deterioration of dress. Even for those at an advanced stage of dementia the embodied, tactile nature of clothing can be significant as part of the 'environment closest in', the immediate physical soundings of the body (Twigg, 2010; Twigg & Buse, 2013). Dress is also highly important for relatives as a way of maintaining a sense of the person they were. At the same time, clothes can present practical challenges in care settings, with tensions between maintaining identity through dress, and ease of care.

Handbags and identity

As an aspect of dress, handbags have been described as an 'extension of the self' (Kaufman, 2011, p. 8) or an 'identity kit' (Nippert-Eng, 1996, p. 57) - a literal container for the self. They are significant for identity in terms of their appearance, the image they convey, their embodied relationship to the wearer, and the items that are held inside. Despite this, there has been little sociological work on handbags, with the exception of that of the French sociologist Kaufman (2011). However, studies of handbags by photographers (Hagerty, 2002; Klein cited by Perrine, 2011), journalists (Gallagher, 2006) and market researchers (Styring, 2007) have revealed how they are embedded within women's everyday lives, relationships and identities.

The items inside women's handbags provide clues to various aspects of their identity, giving a 'snapshot of the owner' at a particular moment in time (Hagerty, 2002, p. 20). Handbags contain items such as credit cards, business cards, and sometimes passports, which provide literal proof of identity, as well as various functional items which provide resources to deal with any occurrence throughout the day. In addition, handbags contain what Kaufman (quoted by Laronche, 2011) describes as 'apparently useless treasures related to memorable events, emotions and superstition'. Like other aspects of dress, handbags and their contents can function as 'memory objects' (Ash, 1996), evoking powerful memories of people or events. Items which no longer have any functional use - such as expired identity cards, concert tickets, or an old set of keys - may be retained in handbags as a way of maintaining connections to past roles or aspects of the self (Nippert-Eng, 1996).

The outward appearance of a handbag is also significant in terms of the image it conveys, and what it reveals - or conceals - about the owner's identity (Hagerty, 2002). Klein (quoted by Laronche, 2011) describes handbags as 'an expression of style' and states 'a woman's handbag is a bit like a man's car: it corresponds to the image they wish to project.' Like other aspects of dress, the image conveyed by different handbags manifests social divisions, and dimensions of class, gender, and age (Twigg, 2013). Expensive designer handbags, for instance, signify wealth and status, whilst getting caught with a 'fake' can disrupt the authenticity of performance (Hagerty, 2002).

Handbags are also highly gendered. Associated with femininity and the female body, they are sometimes seen as a 'vaginal' or 'womb like' spaces (Hagerty, 2002). The interior of a handbag is a particularly private space, which cannot be entered without permission, and is connected to intimate, feminine bodily practices, containing items such as tampons, beauty products, make-up and condoms. The use of different handbags for different occasions may reflect how women 'do' femininity differently in different spaces (West & Zimmerman, 1987), and the type of identity they wish to convey. For instance, women in male-dominated scientific professions sometimes avoid bringing a handbag to work, instead preferring a rucksack or briefcase, due to the association of handbags with femininity (Nippert-Eng, 1996). It has been argued that the expanding size and contents of women's handbags in recent years signifies their growing freedom from the domestic sphere (Hagerty, 2002), though also their increasingly complex identities and roles, with some women literally 'weighed down' by their responsibilities (Kaufman, 2011).

In terms of age, women's handbags change throughout the life-course in size and style, in relation to changing roles and responsibilities. During childhood, handbags are merely for 'play' and filled with sweets or chocolate money (Hagerty, 2002). The acquisition of one's first 'real' handbag has been described as a marker of the transition to womanhood, with the need to conceal tampons (Ginsburg, 1996), as well as to carry items such as money, cards, and keys (Styring, 2007). During adulthood, handbags become larger in relation to women's increasingly complex roles, with mothers carrying the largest bags to provide not only for their needs, but those of their children. In later life it is argued that handbags shrink again, as women are no longer weighed down by so many responsibilities (Kaufman, 2011). Handbags also take on negative connotations associated with ageing female bodies, with terms like 'old bag' signifying unattractiveness and being past one's sexual prime (Harrison, 1983), once again underlining the connections between bags and the vagina. 'Bag lady' similarly indicates dilapidation, dysfunction and individual pathology (Kisor & Kendal Wilson, 2002). These changing meanings of handbags can take on particular significance in relation to dementia and the transition to frail old age.

Methodology

The article draws on an ESRC funded UK study, Dementia and Dress, which explored the role of clothing in the everyday lives of people with dementia, carers, and care-workers, using ethnographic and qualitative methods. The ethnographic research was conducted across three care homes in Kent, and with people with dementia and their family carers living

in their own homes. The three care homes were chosen to reflect variety in ownership and practice: the first was run by a third sector organisation; the second owned by a small business; and the third by a private health care company. One of these homes had a separate dementia unit, whilst the others specialised in the care of older people with dementia.

The sample included thirty-two case studies of people with dementia; nine men and twenty-three women. However, due to the gendered nature of handbags, in this paper we focus on women in the sample. Of these women, ten were living in their own homes, and thirteen in care homes. They were purposively selected to reflect different socio-economic backgrounds (see table 1), and stages of dementia (from mild to severe). The sample also included twenty-nine family carers and relatives, twenty-eight members of staff (care-workers, managers and laundry workers), and representatives from clothing companies that supply dementia care settings.

Methods of data collection included observations and qualitative interviews, as well as innovative visual and sensory approaches. Dementia studies research is increasingly incorporating innovative methodologies, which utilise material objects and the physical and sensory environment to support verbal communication (Bartlett & O'Connor, 2010; Litherland, 2008). For instance, researchers have used 'walking interviews' to explore how people with dementia and their carers negotiate their neighbourhoods and outdoor spaces (Sheehan, Burton & Mitchell 2006; Ward, Clark & Hargreaves, 2012). We used a range of material objects during one-to-one discussions and reminiscence groups, including: photograph albums; prompt cards; visual images; samples of fabric; clothing and accessories. 'Wardrobe interviews' were also conducted- interviewing with people with dementia alongside their wardrobes, and using the clothes as visual and sensory prompts (Banim & Guy, 2001; Woodward, 2007). These interviews were guided by a list of topics, including: memories of clothes; meanings of clothes (e.g. favourite clothes, what is important about clothes); identity; decision making; challenges and difficulties.

In domestic households, wardrobe interviews were conducted jointly with family carers, which enabled the carer to provide support during the interview, and also gave direct insight into interactions and tensions around dress (Valentine, 1999). Although there are concerns that family carers may 'speak for' the person with dementia in joint interviews (Bartlett & O'Connor, 2010), the interviewer was careful to explore both viewpoints, and differences of opinion. Family carers and care-workers were also interviewed separately- this enabled sensitive issues and difficulties with dress to be explored in more depth, which were often minimised in the accounts of people with dementia (either due to memory loss, or a desire to maintain a particular presentation of self).

The use of observations facilitated the inclusion of people with more advanced dementia, who found verbal communication challenging (Hubbard, Tester & Downs, 2003). Observations were unstructured, and took place within the public areas of the care homes, as well as incidentally during visits to domestic settings. This included observation of non-verbal responses and reactions to clothing; assistance with dress; care routines; and informal

discussions and interactions around dress. Data from fieldnotes and interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, assisted by NVIVO qualitative software.

Handbags as memory and biographical objects

Handbags are intertwined with memories, histories and identities. As Hagerty (2002, p. 61) suggests: ‘unclasping a bag is like taking the cap off a whistling kettle: genies of memory escape’. They are ‘biographical objects...entangled in the events of a person’s life and used as a vehicle for selfhood’ (Hoskins, 1998, p. 2). Handbags revealed something of this in the interviews. Rummaging through, touching and looking at handbags during wardrobe interviews or reminiscence groups stimulated memories. Handbags brought back associations with happier times: large bags for family holidays or days trips; small, glamorous bags for weddings, occasions and nights out.

For women with dementia in both care home and domestic settings, handbags facilitated telling stories about their lives and personal histories. However, the stories they told not only revealed differences in their biographies, but in how they negotiated their current situation. For women who had been housewives, handbags embodied their investment in the domestic sphere, and the literal ‘carrying’ of family responsibilities (Kaufman, 2011). For instance, Edith’s favourite bag was ‘a big handbag’ which she had used ‘to carry lots of things for the kids’. In contrast, Hazel who had been a ‘career woman’ focused on narratives of growing up and rebelling against her mother, who had ‘gone off’ handbags, and ‘was quite cross with me because I still took my handbag everywhere I went!’

Such narratives take on a particular significance in the context of the care home. As a care home resident, Hazel’s narrative reasserted a sense of agency which is diminished in this setting. Rita, another care home resident, focused on narratives of ‘dressing up’ and ‘going out’ when talking about handbags:

I used to have a... one for evening wear. A gold colour, you know, with a twisted top. A little gold one. I used to hang it on my arm. Yeah, when I went to these Mason dos. [...] Ladies evening. So you used to have to dress up for that.

These descriptions invoke ‘vivid snapshots of energy, youth and self-importance’ in contrast to the dependency embodied by the care home (Hockey, 1989, p. 205).

Because handbags were so embedded with connections to memories and identity, women still living at home often retained large collections of unused handbags in their wardrobes. This reflects practices common among women generally, and analysed by Banim and Guy (2001) and Woodward (2007) in their work on ‘kept clothes’. The materiality of these bags and their contents acted as triggers for memories, for both family carers and people with dementia:

Maggie: Let’s see if there’s anything inside.

Ellie: Lipsticks always in handbags. Always. And mints. She always had mints in her handbag as well.

Sophie Woodward (2007) argues that women often keep clothing in their wardrobes following a rupture in their biography, stored and retained, but no longer used. In the context of dementia, handbags sometimes fell into this category. Alice - a housewife - had a large collection of handbags that she had gathered over the years, often for special events and family occasions, such as weddings and anniversaries. As her dementia progressed she increasingly lost her handbags when she went out, so her husband discouraged her from bringing them. She was now unable to attend more formal evenings out, which would justify the use of glamorous evening bags. However, she said she could not throw them away because they are 'part of her':

Fred: Well that's basically what she collected over the years because she don't like to get rid of them but...

Alice: No. We don't want to get rid of them. They're part of me, aren't they. [...] That's the point, isn't it?

Fred: This is it, isn't it; keeping... you know, that part.

Like other biographical objects Alice's handbags were intertwined with her personal history and memories: to throw them away was akin to throwing away a part of herself. Her husband also talked about 'keeping that part' of her through her handbags. Similarly, family carer Ellie kept some of her Nan's handbags after she went into care, as a way of 'keeping hold' of an aspect of her. Retaining objects which are closely associated with a person can provide a means of 'memorializing', 'donating', or extending the self after death (Belk, 1988; Ekerdt, Addington & Hayter, 2011). In a similar way, handbags for relatives can be a way of retaining contact with the person partly lost.

However, retaining unused - and seemingly useless bags - was sometimes a matter of tension between women with dementia and their husbands. Frank could not see why his wife Rose wanted to keep such a large collection of handbags. Regarding bags rather narrowly, he felt they were no longer functional, saying she 'doesn't need it' as she 'doesn't need money' and 'I see to all her finances and everything else.' Nonetheless when he suggested throwing some of her handbags away, she strongly resisted:

Frank: I'm going to get rid of some of them. I must... I must get rid of them.

Rose: No you won't! I'll do what I want. I know what I need.

Belk (1988) argues that if we chose to throw possessions away because they no longer fit with our identity, this is not a traumatic experience, but when such dispossession is forced, due a change in circumstances, it can be highly distressing. He suggests that the disposal of possessions can be experienced as part of the 'shrinkage' of a person's identity, particularly if it coincides with a broader shrinkage of their world and social connections, such as that associated with the transition to the fourth age and frailty. While acquiring a handbag to carry money and keys marks the transition to adulthood (Hagerty, 2002), the discarding of handbags suggests a transition to the fourth age, and a loss of independence with the

progression of dementia. Rose had been a highly skilled dressmaker, and this was still important to her identity. However, her dementia had reached a stage when she could no longer do everyday activities such as dressing, washing, and eating independently, or retain her skills in dressmaking. Keeping these bags symbolised resistance to the loss of her identity, and the 'shrinkage' in her social world.

The transition to care similarly marks a point when many possessions have to be discarded (Fairhurst, 1999), and few women in the care home sample had large handbag collections, with most retaining just one or two bags. However, handbags took on a new significance in terms of their contents, representing a place to store 'treasures' connected with their previous lives (Kaufman, 2011). They acted as what Parkin (1999) describes as 'transitional' objects - objects which help displaced persons maintain connections to their history and identity. For example, Marie kept a range of objects inside her handbag which were connected to her biography. These included:

- A hairdressing kit. Marie used to be a hairdresser and ran her own business with her parents, and said she carried this 'because I'm a hairdresser so I carry that and all my hairdresser kit'.
- A locket displaying photographs of her parents.
- An army cap badge which she described as a 'Star of India', belonging to her uncle.
- A pair of ballet slippers, reflecting her enjoyment of dancing, and her participation in regional ballet competitions and amateur theatre.

Marie's handbag therefore provided a materialisation of various aspects of her identity, and a means of keeping these aspects of the self close to her during the transition to the care home. Other women in the care homes kept items in their bags such as photographs, birthday cards and letters which suggested connections to their previous lives, as well as more functional items like make-up or magazines. Several ladies kept knitting wool and needles in their handbags, even though they no longer knitted, because making garments had been such an important part of their everyday lives and identities (Parker, 1984). Belk suggests that following the loss of possessions, the owner will engage in activities of 'self-restoration', and attempt to 'extend the self in new ways' (1988, p. 143). Therefore in the context of moving to a care home and the loss of connection to familiar objects, handbags took on a new role retaining connections with memories and identity, as 'one of the few possessions left' (Jones, 2004, p. 265).

Security and vulnerability

Handbags also took on a new role following the transition to institutional care, in maintaining a sense of ontological security (Giddens, 1991). Instead of being something which could be discarded in a safe corner on arriving home, handbags become something which was constantly held on to, carried or clutched against the body. Ellie described this change with regard to her Nan, who moved into a care home during the study:

It's... it's a big security thing for Nan. If she didn't have her handbag she wouldn't cope; she really wouldn't. You know, when she was in her flat it was okay, she

could... she knew that it was down the side of that sofa even if she was sitting on that sofa. But now it's... like it's glued to her.

Handbags provided women living in care homes with a sense of security in several ways. First, the tangibility of a handbag, being able to touch it and know it is close at hand, could itself provide reassurance, particularly when the owner felt vulnerable (Hagerty, 2002). This is particularly significant in the context of the loss of mental security that marks the condition. During observations in the care homes many women would sit with their handbag on their lap, or would reach down by the side of their chair to check it was still there. One woman said 'I couldn't exist without it' and explained she had always carried a handbag because 'I suppose it was a sort of thing you felt you couldn't do without, and so you took it with you.' The embodied, habitual practice of carrying a handbag was something that was ingrained in many women, and was carried forward to the new setting of the care home, proving a sense of comfort and bodily continuity. As one participant said:

Hazel: I don't mind having a handbag. I've always had a handbag. [...] Well I like to carry it over my shoulder or over my arm and it's got some money in it if I need it, and, you know, it was sort of part of me really.

Researcher: Yeah. So you always like to have it with you?

Hazel: Yes.

Researcher: Mmmm. I'm like that. You can stick everything in there, can't you, and...

Hazel: You can and that was what it... that was what I liked about it. If you had the right sized handbag – not too big- you could put everything you wanted for the day in it and didn't have to worry about carrying it all about because it was all in one bag.

In this extract Hazel talks about having the things she needs close to hand in her bag, which provides security in the sense of having the resources ready to deal with any occurrence (Kaufman, 2011).

Handbags were also related to security in the sense of providing a private place in which to keep treasured possessions safe. Several participants said they kept their bag with them at all times in order to keep jewellery or other possessions secure, as they were worried about other residents stealing from them. Marie said; 'that's why I want to look after the bag because I have jewellery and things in them, you know, so carry around.' In the absence of a private or secure locked space in the care home, handbags were seen by residents as the only truly safe place.

Handbags and the boundaries of public/private space

The embodied, habitual practice of carrying a handbag around the care home also reflected the meaning of the setting in relation to the boundaries of public/private space and of 'home'

(Nippert-Eng, 1996). In general women do not carry bags with them when at home: bags belong to public space. The bag practice of the women in the care home sample thus pointed up the uncertain character of care homes as domestic or private space. Despite the rhetoric of providers, research on care homes reveals that their home-like character is partial, significantly compromised by care regimes and institutional logics (Hockey, 1999; Reed-Danahey, 2001). This was reflected in the way several of the women in care homes carried their handbags constantly with them, suggesting they were 'not at home'. Some would repeatedly ask where they were and when they were going home. Sorting, organising and holding onto a handbag represented a state of waiting, of preparing to return home. Lillian, for example, once spent a whole day sitting by the door sorting through her handbags, and asking 'When am I going home? Is this all I'm taking, these two bags?' Another woman – Florence - had been known to pack her suitcase and bags on several occasions, and wait in the corridor of the dementia unit for the bus to take her home. The fact most residents wore slippers, however, was an embodied reminder of the ambiguous status of the setting on the boundaries of public/private, and of home/not home.

The absence of keys, cards and money from the handbags of women in the care home sample, reflects this loss of privacy and 'home' following the transition to care. In the care setting, there is a lack of access to truly private spaces, as even bedrooms are subject to intrusion during routines of bodywork (Wiersma & Dupuis, 2010). In contrast, some women in the early stages of dementia who were living independently at home still retained these items in their bags. Keys have symbolic importance beyond their functional use, as markers of independence, with the power to 'unlock aspects of the self', giving access to spaces such as the home which are connected to identity (Nippert-Eng, 1996, p.48), whilst money is symbolic of autonomy and 'possibilities' (Belk, 1988, p.150). As a result one family carer, Ellie, had fought to ensure that her Nan, Maggie, still retained money in her bag when she moved into a care home. Whilst her money may have no functional use here, it still held symbolic significance:

...she has some cash on her, which the care home don't like, but we have said to them 'if she doesn't have any money on her you'll never hear the end of it'. You know, it's like a security blanket for her.

Maggie was a fiercely independent woman, and had been living on her own prior to going into care. Privacy and independence were therefore highly important to her. Ellie had also insisted that her Nan was given a key to her room, to which the care home reluctantly agreed. She was therefore able to retain some elements of privacy and autonomy associated with 'home'.

However, the majority of women living in care homes were unable to access this privacy; therefore carrying a handbag could be used as a strategy for creating a sense of private space, something that is difficult to do when most of the day is spent in public areas (McColgan, 2005). Women appeared to use their handbags as 'props', part of rituals to create privacy in public spaces such as the care home lounge (Henderson, 1975). For instance, Lillian would often spend a whole day continuously sorting through her bag, which provided a way to avoid

interactions with other residents. The bag contained items including her jewellery, perfume and knitting wool that she was very fond of, and provided an escape from the lounge into her own private world or - as Kaufman (2011) puts it - her 'small world of affection'.

The act of rummaging or sorting through a handbag also provided women in care homes with a 'distraction' - a means of looking busy or purposeful when sitting alone in a public space, disguising a sense of discomfort (Henderson, 1975). One participant, Sadie, who sometimes entered the lounge in the morning on her own, looking a little unsure of what to do or who to talk to, would start checking through her bag. This seemed to put her at ease, bringing to mind the 'props' women in general use when waiting alone for someone in a public space such as a railway station or bar, feeling ill at ease. Handbags were also used literally as 'territorial markers' - particularly in one care home lounge where space was very limited - so residents could mark out *their* chair if they got up to go to the toilet (Harris & Lipman, 1980). Handbags thus provided a way of creating, maintaining and negotiating the boundaries of private space, at the same time as offering a private 'inner' world.

Unruly bags

Women's relationship with their handbags is also characterised by ambivalence, 'filled with beauty and disgust, function and emotion, pleasure, amusement, alarm and despair' (Styring, 2007, p. 12). This ambivalence takes on a particular significance in the context of dementia, particularly in care home settings. The bodywork of care involves the management of dirt (Twigg, 2000). However, the privacy of handbags means that it is difficult for care-workers to monitor or manage this space, constituting it as 'unmanageable' or 'unruly'. Care-workers described residents with dementia who would hide dirty underwear or soiled toilet paper in their handbags, or use their bags to collect items from around the care home, including cutlery, teeth and glasses belonging to other residents. Thus handbags become contaminated with 'dirt' - in terms of bodily excrement, but also 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966). Items such as teeth or glasses represent 'symbolic' contamination because intimately associated with the extended self of another person and imprinted with traces of that person's body (Belk, 1988). Jones (2004) suggests such gathering of strange objects from around the care home should be viewed not as dysfunctional, so much as an attempt to replace lost objects, roles and attachments as dementia progresses.

The management and removal of 'dirty' items from handbags is suggestive of the power dynamics and limitations of privacy in care settings. As discussed earlier, handbags represent private space, which should not be entered without permission. However, in a care situation, workers have to power to 'invade' and empty handbags, under the guise of safety, and a duty of care. Although we did not observe conflicts around emptying handbags, some care staff acknowledged a tension between the requirement to manage their contents, and transgressive nature of entering this private space, describing residents as 'naturally possessive' of their bags.

Handbags could also be unruly in terms of their 'leaky' boundaries, and a failure to conceal items associated with intimate bodily practices, which are normally excluded from public

areas of the care home. Hagerty (2002) argues that while handbags have the power to conceal items such as tampons, make-up and condoms, they may also unintentionally spill out, revealing hidden aspects of the self. Whilst continuously sorting her handbag, Lillian pulled out various strange and intimate items including: a bra; an incontinence pad; shredded tissues; and a bracelet hidden inside a crisp packet. Sometimes her jewellery and precious possessions would come spilling out of her bag when she moved from her chair, with care-workers helping to retrieve them. Such leaky boundaries reflect a broader loss of inhibitions associated with dementia: Lillian would frequently talk about her incontinence pad or bodily issues around toileting, and on occasion had undressed in the public setting of the lounge.

This use of handbags to gather meaningful objects and keep them close within the context of the care home meant that their sheer weight could also be problematic. Hazel was constantly checking the weight of her bag, and worrying about how she was going to get it home. Handbags sometimes became too heavy to carry, and required assistance from care-workers to transport them around the home. Eventually care-workers or relatives would suggest a 'clear out', as Marie's cousin said:

I know when we used to go out it got to the stage where I had to say to her, 'Marie, you're going to have to empty that a bit because it's too heavy to carry...'

Therefore, handbags could come to embody what Smith and Ekerdt (2011) describe as the 'material convey' - the possessions accumulated over our life-course that are meaningful because of their connections with biography and identity. In later life, however, this material convoy can become problematic, 'weighing' the person down; and many frail older people are encouraged to sort and discard their belongings.

Handbags also became unruly in the sense that dementia makes it increasingly difficult to 'hang on' to objects and possessions (Jones, 2004); and some women were constantly looking for their bags around the care home, or in their own homes. This could create a great deal of anxiety, as Kathy said:

Sometimes I just can't remember where I put things. I have to go through all the drawers and the wardrobes. I get... oh, what's the word? Frustrated. Like my bag, I'm like it all the time with my bags. And I'm anxious, not because anyone would steal from it, it's because my keys are in there so if I lost my bag I wouldn't be able to get in.

Kathy was still in the early stages of dementia and living independently at home, therefore her anxieties about losing her bag related to concerns about losing access to this private space. Within the care setting, women were often concerned about other residents stealing their bag, reflecting the loss of security and privacy in this context. Care home residents with dementia would sometimes accidentally pick up someone else's handbag, which one worker described as creating arguments between residents or 'handbag wars'. As Ruth, a registered nurse in the dementia unit at one care home, said:

...they do cause a problem because other ladies think it's their handbag or they'll see the bag, they'll open it and take things out or, you know, other people will perceive that somebody's in their handbag when it isn't actually their handbag.

It is because handbags are so critical in providing a resource for coping with day to day life, and maintaining the self - particularly in care settings - that their loss is so upsetting (Belk, 1987). Therefore dementia can exacerbate women's ambivalent relationship to their bags, as 'emotional objects' (Lupton, 1998) which evoke comfort and security, but also anxiety and frustration (Kaufman, 2011).

These difficulties with handbags increase as dementia progresses, culminating at a point when they can no longer be retained. Handbags were notably absent from the arms of those women in care homes with severe dementia or physical frailty. Similarly in domestic settings, women with more advanced dementia had resigned their treasured handbags to storage. Ruth recalled how Florence, a resident at the dementia unit, gradually forgot her bag as her dementia progressed:

Yes, she just stopped... stopped using it, yeah. Or it was put down and forgotten about and she would then say she's lost it and want to find it. [...] But that eventually stopped. She, you know, stopped thinking about her bag and didn't, you know, speak about it at all. And we did go through a spell with her where she would get her suitcase and fill it with her clothes. [...] And come down to the lounge and say she's going home now and she'd have a suitcase with her. [...] But she doesn't do that anymore either.

The eventual discarding of handbags reflects the progression of dementia. However, as this quotation suggests, it may also reflect changing meanings of space, and material and symbolic divisions. As a resident in the dementia unit for five years, Florence eventually ceased asking about her bag, and stopped packing her bags to return home. Therefore, relinquishing ones' handbag can demonstrate the gradual socialization of bodies into institutional care (Wiersma & Dupuis, 2010), and a letting go of 'home'.

Conclusion

Through exploring handbag practices, the article has illustrated the power of material objects to retain connections to identity in the face of memory loss associated with dementia, and transitions to care. It has explored how handbags helped women with dementia to 'tell their lives', as well as retaining connections to their memories and histories at a material and embodied level. Objects can work to extend or 'stand in' for a person (Hockey et al., 2013), and assist people with dementia to tell their story and express who they are, in the face of impaired verbal communication. The article therefore shows the potential of objects for supporting personhood in dementia care, through maintaining connections to biography, and putting 'the person before the dementia' (Kitwood, 1997).

Handbags also have particular significance because of their embodied relationship to the wearer. Memories were not only encoded in the bags themselves, but were also 'embodied

implicitly' (Hockey, 1989, p. 202) in habitual practices of carrying a handbag. These practices are shaped by gendered and generational location, illustrating how personhood can be enacted at embodied level (Kontos, 2004) through relationships to 'things'. Objects which have an intimate relationship to the body become 'part of' the wearer, and are emotionally charged (Lupton, 1998). The act of carrying a handbag in itself evoked comfort and security, although its loss created anxiety and frustration.

The research supports a growing recognition of the significance of material objects in dementia care, and has implications for practice. Handbags can work as a form of 'memory box' - a way of storing objects which provide tactile and visual stimulus for memory (Gulwadi, 2013). They can facilitate interactions with other residents and with staff as 'conversational objects' (Saunders et al., 2012). As argued by Jones (2004), in addition to using objects as part of therapeutic activities, people with dementia should be supported to maintain everyday objects - including handbags - in care settings:

...the reality remains that most of us 'feel lost and anxious' without our handbags. Its value is as much symbolic as it is in its literal presence, one of the few possessions left- the thing that has functioned as a lifesaver throughout life still 'feels like' a lifesaver. How can we teach staff that a handbag (without much in it), or a watch (even though it may not work), or a necklace (with much wear), or a tweed cap (that is not needed for warmth), or a newspaper (even though it's a month old) can bring back feelings of security and normalcy, which are valuable, beyond the literal value of these objects? (Jones, 2004, p. 265)

Jones suggests that staff can provide alternative ways of storing meaningful objects when dementia reaches the point at which handbags can no longer be maintained, for example, using aprons or trays, or providing people with dementia with replacement bags. Recognition of the significance of material objects - despite an apparent loss of functional use - is something that can be incorporated into training and information for care-workers.

The findings of the article also contribute to research on ageing and material culture, which uses a 'materialist lens' for understanding transition and meaning-making in later life (Chapman, 2006). In particular, our research supports arguments that the 'small' - and often neglected - aspects of dress such as shoes and handbags can in fact illuminate the embodied, affective, and sensory dimensions of life-course transitions (Hockey et al. 2013). Our research also extends such arguments to the context of dementia and frail old age. Handbags were embedded within the transition to the fourth age and frailty, and the loss of handbags and their contents signified a loss of independence. However, handbags were not simply a marker of transition and loss, but were significant to negotiating - and contesting - this transition. Carrying a handbag within a care home in itself evokes meanings associated with other settings, and previous aspects of social identity. Handbags also provided a 'prop' for managing the lack of privacy in care home settings, and the act of packing and holding on to a bag challenges meanings of care homes as 'homely'. Nonetheless, such agency is bounded, and decreased as dementia progressed, with eventual abandonment of handbags perhaps marking a resignation to institutional life.

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