

Abstract

This early article in *The University of Chicago Magazine*, coauthored with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, was one of the first publications deriving from Eugene Halton's dissertation research on the meanings of household possessions for a sample of over 300 three-generation Chicago area families. In addition to empirical findings reported in Halton's dissertation and later in the book coauthored with Csikszentmihalyi, *The Meaning of Things*, the article introduces Halton's distinction of two kinds of materialism, *instrumental materialism* and *terminal materialism*.

Keywords: materialism, instrumental materialism, terminal materialism, meaning, symbolic ecology

The University of Chicago Magazine
Vol 70, No. 3, Spring, 1978, pp. 6-15.

People and Things

REFLECTIONS ON MATERIALISM

By Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
and Eugene Rochberg-Halton

If there is one opinion about the United States that most people around the world seem to agree on, it is that American culture is distinguished by unprecedented materialism. Yet some astute observers from other lands who are well acquainted with our style of life have claimed exactly the opposite, namely that Americans are the least materialistic people who have ever lived. The second is decidedly a minority opinion, but its very existence raises the question: what does materialism mean?

There are two contemporary usages of the term, materialism, and it is important to distinguish between them. On the one hand we can talk about *instrumental materialism*, or the use of material objects to make life longer, safer, more enjoyable. By instrumental, we mean that objects act as essential means for discovering and furthering personal values and goals of life, so that the objects are instruments used to realize and further those goals. There is little negative connotation attached to this meaning of the word, since one would think that it is perfectly sensible to use things for such purposes. While it is true that the United States is the epitome of materialism in this sense, it is also true that most people in every society aspire to reach our level of instrumental materialism.

On the other hand the term has a more negative connotation, which might be conveyed by the phrase *terminal materialism*. This is the sense critics use when they apply the term to Americans. What they mean is that we not only use our material resources as instruments to make life more manageable, but that we reduce our ultimate goals to the possession of things. They believe that we don't just use our cars to get from place to place, but that we consider the ownership of expensive cars one of the central values in life. Terminal materialism means that the object is valued only because it indicates an end in itself, a possession. In instrumental materialism there is a sense of directionality, in which a person's goals may be furthered through the interactions with the object. A book, for example, can reveal new possibilities or widen a person's view of the world, or an old photograph can be cherished because it embodies a relationship. But in terminal materialism, there is no sense of reciprocal interaction in the relation between the object and the end. The end is valued as final, not as itself a means to further ends. And quite often it is only the status label or image associated with the object that is valued, rather than the actual object. In this sense of materialism "the end justifies the means", because when one values something only as an end in itself, other possible ends or outcomes can be ignored. When a person defines his or her goals primarily in terms of owning things—a large home, a number of appliances, a diversified portfolio, and so on—one might speak of terminal materialism. And this, critics say, is a decadent set of goals for a culture to have.

The distinction is essential from an ecological point of view. Instrumental materialism has certain built-in limits: human needs for a good life are not all that exorbitant. But terminal materialism might paradoxically lead to an endless escalation of demands on the environment. If we rely on expensive, energy-intensive objects to give meaning to life, then we are likely to ask for

more and more things, more and more energy, until the resources of the planet are exhausted, or the seams of the social fabric are torn.

Therefore it is essential for survival to answer the question: "Is it true that terminal materialism is rampant in our society?" Intuitively most persons, or at least most intellectuals, would give a resounding positive answer. For all we know, they might be right. But the fact is that very little is known about how people formulate goals in their lives, what weight they give to material things, and for what reasons, in their hierarchy of values. Certainly there is no way at this stage to compare with any accuracy the materialistic values of contemporary Americans with those, of say, medieval Germans or ancient Romans.

Several years ago we began to explore some of the issues involved in this question. We wanted to find out what values a cross-section of Americans find in the objects they own, and what place such objects have in their overall life goals. Two years ago we were given a grant from the National Institute on Aging, a branch of the Public Health Service, to continue our research in earnest. Although much work still needs to be done, some interesting trends have begun to appear.

We received permission from a number of families in the Chicago Metropolitan Area to visit their homes. We interviewed about 300 representative people—grandparents, children and grandchildren—about the people they admired most, the things they most enjoyed doing, the most significant events in their lives, and so on. In particular, we asked what objects in their homes were most special, and for what reason; what objects they would save in case of a fire, and why; what objects they felt they should leave to their children or would like to get from their parents.

We expected that talking about the most significant things they owned would reveal something important about the goals of American people. We hoped to get a start in making clear the outlines of materialism in our society. But before we report some of our findings, it might be useful to review briefly the question as to what is involved in creating meaning in one's life.

Meaning is a process of interpretation through the use of signs and symbols. When something "means something" to us, we are interpreting it in the context of our past experiences, either consciously or unconsciously as a habit. Even the feeling that the thing evokes in us is an interpretation, a sign or symbol of our attitude toward it. A symbol is any sign—sound, object or gesture—that

as a result of convention becomes associated with images, feelings, or thoughts which are not immediately given in that sign. A leaf, for instance, is inherently nothing but a leaf. But for Canadians a maple leaf may cause stirrings of patriotism, and fans of the Toronto hockey team respond to it with feelings of strong loyalty. The *cannabis* leaf emblazoned on so many artifacts of the counter-culture might produce rage in a traditional adult, or a sensation of freedom in a teenager. The acanthus leaf brought thoughts of immortality to the Greeks, while a frond of olive spoke of peace.

As humanity began to develop this procedure of making certain things stand for others, the symbols themselves were creating a human being which could reflect on its surroundings and change its own conduct to a degree not even remotely approximated in other species. For if a leaf could produce a sense of peace, and a tooth or bone could induce terror, then things had qualities which were not immediately apparent or given in their physical constitution. Thus symbols were able to carry feelings and attitudes that had an objective existence outside immediate situations, and this development of consciousness is generally considered the greatest accomplishment of mankind. By freeing sensations from their immediate environment we have become able to deal with them in the abstract, and thus to some extent have achieved greater self-control and control over the environment. With the help of symbols such experiences as fear, love or awe could now be communicated in words, pictures or ritual acts. The development of symbols in a cultural tradition meant that man could compare his actions with those of his ancestors to anticipate new experiences. Man's possibilities were enlarged because he could learn the accumulated experience of his people. This had the two-sided effect of increasing the range of solutions and the range of problems. When our goals become short-sighted, we can actually create more problems than we solve.

Of all the symbolic systems language is by far the most prevalent and effective. Every time we say "What a nice day," or "This coffee sure tastes good," we reaffirm a hierarchy of values by assigning positive characteristics like "nice" and "good" to certain features of weather and beverage. When we say "It's time to get up," or "Children should be in bed by now," we implicitly state the desirability of certain patterns of behavior which, in turn, invoke a whole set of life goals. It is no exaggeration to say, as the sociologists Berger and Luckmann have said, that it is through conversation that we create and maintain the structure of the world in which we live.

If language has a privileged position among symbol systems, the everyday objects that we surround ourselves with in the home also have an important role to play. In every culture, household objects have helped to mediate the network of values that give meaning to

people's lives. In preliterate societies the carvings and paintings of the beams, the weavings on the mats, the decorations on tools and utensils depicted what the inhabitants of the house thought they were and what they were about. In Rome and China, India and Japan, ancestral shrines expressed the continuity between living and departed members of a family. In medieval homes, icons and crucifixes stood for the relationship between people's lives and a divine order that was presumed to rule the universe.

Thus the objects one chooses for oneself constitute a *symbolic ecology* that integrates in concrete form the elusive strands of meaning which give value to one's life. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz has observed, symbols are both "models of" and "models for" living. On the one hand they represent the kind of feelings, attitudes and relationships we think exist and matter in the world. On the other hand they point towards feelings or values that we have not yet reached, but wished we had. When things are "models for" values of this kind, they transcend their material substance and become vehicles for the expansion of the social self.

There is nothing mystical about such transcendent power of symbolic objects. George Herbert Mead, one of our own intellectual "ancestors" here at the University, and as pragmatic a thinker as anyone could wish, expressed the idea as follows:

It is possible for inanimate objects, no less than for other human organisms, to form parts of the generalized and organized—the completely socialized—other for any human individual. . . . Any thing—any objects or set of objects . . . towards which he acts . . . is an element in what for him is the generalized other; by taking the attitudes of which towards himself he becomes conscious of himself as an object or individual and thus develops a self or personality.

Having outlined some of the concepts that guided our inquiry, let us now turn to what the urban Americans we studied say about their relationship to material things. Our respondents, who were all living in Chicago or Evanston, mentioned twelve categories of objects as having special significance in their lives, in descending order of frequency: furniture, painting or other graphic art, musical instruments, books, TV sets, stereo equipment, photographs, plants, plateware, appliances, pets and sports equipment. Each of these categories was mentioned at least once by at least ten percent of the sample.

The kinds of objects mentioned differed markedly in terms of the respondents' age. Table 1 shows the frequencies ranked in terms of the three generations constituting the families interviewed. Perhaps the most dramatic difference between generations is that children are attached to objects with which they can actively interact: stereos, musical instruments, pets, sports equipment, tools, and the refrigerator from which they can obtain food. The grandparents, on the other hand, prefer objects that allow for passive contemplation: photos, books, paintings, plateware, statues, silverware, and so on. Not one of the objects mentioned frequently by grandparents is one that can be actively used.

The parental generation combines both trends. They frequently mention interactive objects such as musical instruments, plants, stereo and appliances. But they also mention the kind of objects that grandparents prefer: paintings, books, photos, statues and glassware.

It seems clear that with age the meaning generated from objects shifts from doing to reflection. A child playing with a pet or a teenager fiddling with a stereo will experience feelings that are important to his or her self-definition. The objects become signs for states of being that are central to the person's conception of self. For the young, meaning arises predominantly out of active manipulation of things.

For their grandparents, meaning appears to be *stored* in objects. Pictures, books, silver and china are signs of former states of being that were once central—and still are—to the self. They do not need to be interacted with to release their meaning. But what is lacking are things that could produce new meanings through interaction. The repertoire of objects chosen by the older generation is reminiscent of a museum; those preferred by their grandchildren embody the liveliness of youth. Nothing illustrates this trend better than the fifth most frequently mentioned object in the three groups. For children it was a pet (let us for the moment refrain from quibbling whether a pet qualifies as an "object"). For their parents it was one or more plants. For *their* parents it was some set of plates. The progression from the live and mobile to the inanimate is quite telling.

There is, of course, nothing surprising in the fact that for children meanings point to the present or the future, while for their elders they recall the past. What we are exploring is how the environment of things that people surround themselves with helps to produce meanings appropriate to different stages of the life cycle.

The generational differences are particularly clear in the case of some types of objects. Figure 1 contrasts the frequency with which five different categories were mentioned as being special by the three generations.

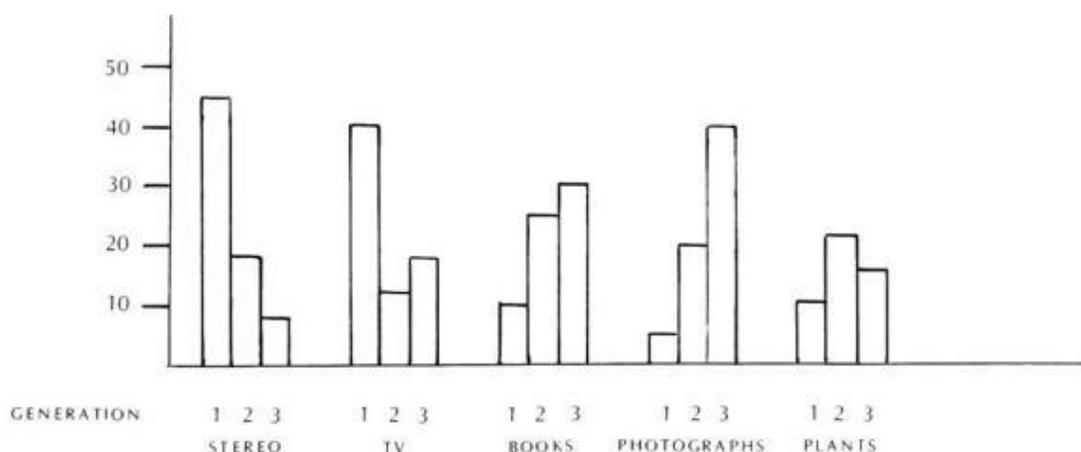


Figure 1. Percent of respondents from three different generations (1 = children, 2 = parents, 3 = grandparents) mentioning five different objects as special.

TABLE 1

Ten most special objects mentioned by respondents of three different generations

	GENERATIONS					
	1 (62 children)		2 (106 parents)		3 (56 grandparents)	
	Percent mentioned		Percent mentioned		Percent mentioned	
1. Furniture	52	Furniture	44	Photographs	38	
2. Stereo	44	Paintings	38	Books	30	
3. TV set	37	Books	24	Paintings		
4. Musical instruments	34	Musical instruments	23	Furniture	20	
5. Pets	26	Plants	19	Plateware	20	
6. Sport equipment	19	Stereo	17	TV set	19	
7. Radio	16	Photographs	16	Statues	14	
8. Refrigerators	13	Statues	14	Silver	13	
9. Tools	11	Appliances	13	China	13	
10. (Five objects tied)	10	Glassware	13	Textiles, quilts	13	

TABLE 2

Ten most special objects mentioned by the parental generation

	60 MOTHERS		46 FATHERS	
	Percent mentioned		Percent mentioned	
1. Furniture	50	Furniture	41	
2. Paintings	43	Paintings	30	
3. Musical instruments	28	TV	24	
4. Plants	27	Books	22	
5. Books	22	Stereo	25	
6. Photographs	22	Musical instruments	15	
7. Plates	22	Cameras	11	
8. Statues	20	Tools	11	
9. Glassware	20	Trophies	11	
10. Appliances	17	Lamps	11	

The importance of stereos declines steadily with age. Television sets decline in importance from children to parents, but then increase again for grandparents. With age books, and especially photographs, become increasingly special as repositories of meaning. Plants are mentioned almost twice as often by the middle generation than by either the young or the old.

Another way of looking at the effect of objects as carriers of meaning is to contrast their use by males as opposed to females. When the middle generation is broken down by sex (Table 2), several differences appear. Both groups agree in listing furniture and paintings as most special. But mothers are more likely to find meaning in traditional symbols like photographs, plateware, statues and glassware. Their active involvement centers on musical instruments, plants, and appliances such as sewing-machines or microwave ovens. The fathers are involved with stereos, musical instruments, cameras and tools. These choices reflect the different conceptions of self stereotyped by the culture along sexual roles. The meaning system men build is different from that of women partly because they learn to use different things to objectify experience. The feelings and thoughts one has in caring for a plant are bound to be different from the ones a person has when using a camera. As the cluster of objects one pays attention to or interacts with solidifies, so do the meanings one derives from experience with them. As a result, different types of selves emerge around goals embedded in the meanings derived from interactions with different objects.

So far, we have inferred meaning from the characteristics of the objects themselves. We are assuming that a plant produces in its caretaker feelings of nurturance, while a trophy is more likely to invoke a feeling of pride in one's past accomplishment. But what do the respondents say about what their objects mean to them? It is still too early in the study to present definitive conclusions. It is already clear, however, that far and away the greatest number of feelings and images produced by the adult respondents' special objects refer to their immediate families. The objects of the home are special because they embody the memory of persons or occasions involving close relatives.

Again, this finding is not one that will raise eyebrows in surprise. After all, home is home precisely because the things in it objectify the experience of being related to people one loves and is loved by. Yet it is perhaps comforting to know that despite exposure to modern technology, sophisticated urban Americans still find in their kinship ties the most extensive sources of meaning. Objects are not so much cherished for their material value, for the status image they provide (although this aspect is certainly underestimated by our interviews), but rather because they produce feelings that

keep fresh in one's memory experiences shared with one's parent, spouse or child.

It is true that preliminary analysis of the data hints at trends that counter this pattern. The more highly educated a person is, for instance, the less likely he or she is to find associations between special objects and the memory of events or relationships involving close relations; instead, the better educated respondents more often stress meanings that refer to their own accomplishments, or to places they had visited. Education thus furthers individuation, a breaking away from kinship ties—although it does not necessarily follow that it emphasizes terminal materialism.

The trends reported thus far begin to illustrate how the things that surround us help to define who we are. To get a better idea of this process, it might be useful to review a few case histories that show real people in the context of the objects of their household. Through these short sketches from our interviews, it will become clearer how objects form part of the network of meanings by which a person is defined and in turn defines his or her self.

F.D. is a tool-and-die maker whose main hobby is to build and fly model airplanes. His favorite place at home is the basement, where his tools are located and where he says he has the most "control over the environment." His objects are special because through them he can do those acts that best express what is most uniquely individual in his life. His lathe, for example, enables him to build and modify his planes which he flies in competitions.

He mentions the astronaut John Glenn as one of the five persons he most admires. One of F.D.'s own most crucial memories involves the time he first soloed as a pilot in the Navy. His objects, memories, and heroes then, all refer to the same meaning; they indicate his past achievements and serve as models for what he might accomplish. He has made the flight of John Glenn into outer space somehow *his* flight, and his exploit in the Navy is described in very similar terms. And now his model airplanes link his experiences of flight with the experiences he derives from the skillful use of tools. His favorite objects, though material, are not valued primarily for extrinsic reasons like their monetary or prestige value; they are instrumental as means towards a goal of self-definition. He describes all of his special objects in these terms:

But it's your familiar surroundings, your anchor to reality, your anchor to the world you identify or associate with.

Like the Greek craftsman Daedalus, this man seems to have harnessed his creative and technical potentialities in one activity which is playful, yet related to his occupation, his most outstanding achievements, and deepest life goals.

The significance of objects is quite different for B.L., a young doctor with three separate "households": one that includes his former wife and children, one his lover and child, the third where he lives occasionally with another lover. This man has moved up in the world from a poor ethnic family to a lucrative profession. This is how B.L. describes the objects that have a special significance to him:

Well, it's unfortunate, I have to admit, I always like to have something different, something which appears to be "better" than somebody else or something "different" than somebody else, so I spend a lot of money on that. And I like pretty things. Pretty women, pretty cars, pretty clothes, pretty houses. . . .

Possession seems to have become an end in itself rather than a means to furthering life goals, as can also be seen in this description of what all of his objects mean:

No more than an ego trip. Nothing that I would go down fighting for. (Interviewer: An ego trip?) It makes me feel good while I'm enjoying those things *to know that I have them* and equally as important, *that other people know I have them*.

When asked to describe his most personal or private objects B.L. mentioned his BMW car, because it is meant to be seen and admired by others as a status symbol:

My *car*—probably because of the images it creates, to be very frank. Being different than most people. Most people don't have a BMW. It's more different than having a Mercedes at this time. . . . It's an ego trip which I admit. I don't think it's so wrong. I hope a lot of people let me do my thing.

Moving up the social ladder appears to have caused a split in this man's life, which is embodied in his love relationships, personal objects, and even in the geographical perception of "home." He sometimes lives with a woman who has his child in a north Chicago suburb, sometimes with a younger woman on the west side. His north side residence, relationships, and objects embody his rise on the social ladder, and the resulting bourgeois respectability, while his west side attachments connect him with his own ethnic roots.

The two previous cases have begun to show how objects can embody different kinds of meanings for individuals. Now we would like to explore how a whole family can use objects to express shared values. The O.

family may serve as a suitable example. Mrs. O., the mother, mentioned Christmas tree ornaments and photos of her children as her most special objects. Christmas is the most special occasion of the year for the whole family, a time for family reunion and a way of celebrating the customs of the mother's ethnic origins. All the other members of the O. family also mentioned Christmas as the most special holiday, and gave detailed descriptions of how they ritually celebrate this occasion. Describing the ornaments Mrs. O. said:

All the ornaments we have I've made over a period of years, and the ones I've bought I've picked out especially for the children, for each one of them, thinking that they'll take them with them when they're older. And so the ornaments are a sort of review of my married life, when each one was made, under what conditions.

When we asked what it would mean not to have the ornaments she replied:

I would be very, very upset. Decorating the house at Christmas is a massive effort, and if I didn't have them, I'd have a hard time trying to convince myself that I was going to enjoy it as much. I would be really crushed.

Likewise, if she no longer possessed the photos of her children:

I would be very crushed. . . . Nothing would be lost other than just a piece of paper, but it's a trail of the past, sort of a sentimental thing.

The importance of family tradition and continuity described here is celebrated and renewed in the annual ritual Christmas dinner:

Everyone in my family looks forward to Christmas all year. We celebrate a traditional European Christmas, with all the traditions surrounding it. My parents make it special, my mother makes it special I should say because it's really her thing. She goes to the trouble of cooking a traditional meal which means three or four days of preparation for a twelve course meal. We always have someone else not from the family come to share in the meal, somebody that doesn't have any other place to go. It's also all the traditions that go with that meal that make it special. We put straw under the table cloth, and at the end of the meal everybody pulls out a piece and depending on how the straw is bent, my mother will tell your fortune. The straw is also reminiscent of the manger. It's a real communion, a very special spirit, and all the food is traditional, food that we don't have any other time throughout the whole year. It just is so special, I hope it never leaves.

Mr. O. also emphasizes the importance of the Christmas feast for the whole family:

On Christmas Eve, we have a traditional European meal, which I was introduced to when I met my wife. I only hope that my mother-in-law can pass this along and my wife to her daughters so that we can perpetuate this. This is a time for getting together. My in-laws have always been thankful for what they had at Christmas. We've always had peripheral type relatives or friends of the family—never hesitated to ask a friend.

Mr. O. is an avid collector, who names old records, tapes of radio shows, and coins as his special objects. He also described a family tree that he is creating, which also expresses this family's interest in continuity:

My family tree. With *Roots* being on the TV last year, my eldest daughter got an interest in history. I have a family history. I have it all the way back to when the first O.'s came over from England in 1630. My daughter had some questions put to her in school, but they just went back two generations, so I think we're going to put together a family tree this spring and summer. . . . I have it written out. A lot of it is typing. My family had family reunions and they'd come from all over the country, some of them, and they put this thing together in bits and pieces. They'd write letters asking, "Am I related to you?" So I have all this.

When we asked what all of the objects he named meant to him, Mr. O. replied:

I don't know if I could really describe it. It's a lot of sentiment. In some ways I'm a sentimentalist. To me, they're links with parents, links with the past. I can relate all these things with people, times, and maybe events. It's not like going to an antique store and buying a watch. Most of the things have been given to me and have a meaning.

The theme of family continuity is just as important for both maternal grandparents, but they have a very different perspective on the permanence of symbolic objects. Three of the four objects mentioned by the grandmother remind her of the old country. One of these is a portrait of her daughters, done when she and her husband were penniless after the war:

This was a very hard time in our life. It was the war, we lost everything. And we left our country, we didn't have nothing. We been on the road, and to me that's very dear. It's sentimental picture. I would be very, very sad if I didn't have.

Having symbolic representations of her children is essential for this woman, just as it is for her daughter.

The portraits communicate a visual image of the children, and a "trail of the past," to use the mother's words, through which memories of particular experiences or emotions can be recalled. The grandmother's feelings are embodied in a more traditional form, an oil painting, while the more recent technological form of photographs embodies the mother's meanings; but each of these objects enables the women to express relationships and experiences, and to compare current situations with past ones.

The grandparents had to flee their native country when their two daughters were infants, and as the grandmother said:

You know what, in my life I lost twice, everything. And I mean everything. When my daughter was four, when we left our country, and the second time when we come from Austria up to Bavaria. I left everything. And they just have one dress, one pair of underwear. And that's all what we have. And that's why I didn't give much value to things. I like, I enjoy, but . . .

When we compare the grandmother's attitude towards the loss of cherished possessions with her ten-year-old granddaughter's description of her most important objects—"Arfie," her stuffed dog, and "Shari," her stuffed teddy bear—We see a clear example of the contrast between experience and innocence:

Arfie. He's in my room and I've had him since I was born. He's all worn out and I sleep with him at night. Shari. She's in my room. I've had both of them since I was born. (Without) Arfie, I'd be *very, very* sad; I'd probably cry too, I'd miss her a lot. She's really small. And I can put her in a suitcase and carry her anywhere. Arfie is bigger and he has a voice box so he makes a lot of noise. But Shari is small, compact and she's real cute.

For F.D., the tool-maker, objects serve as instruments that help him to define who he is in terms of achievement. B.L., the doctor, also uses the things he owns for the same purpose, but in his case objects mediate achievement rather than embody it: the things he is proud of are bought, and their meaning is revealed only indirectly, through the admiration of an anonymous public. For the O. family things acquire meaning because they are signposts of family history, because they help re-experience crucial events and relationships shared by family members.

In each case, things are used to objectify the identity of their owners. But in each of these three examples, the identity that emerges will be different because of the things chosen and the meanings derived from them.

What have we learned from this study concerning the initial question, namely, the terminal materialism of urban Americans? At this point what we have learned is mainly that the question is more difficult to answer than we originally thought. In the first place, we realized what perhaps should have been obvious: that it is practically impossible to have purely material values. No one would say: I prize this object because it is worth a lot of money, or because it is valuable in and of itself. At the most, the terminal value of the object would be expressed in terms of the envy and admiration its value produces in other people. But more often than not, the value of the object consists in its ability to reveal previously undeveloped possibilities of the self, or in its expressing significant social relationships. Thus the main instrumental value of the objects consists in their ability to develop and preserve the self in a socially meaningful context.

Thus, even in our so-called materialistic society, we are still basically social beings who need to define ourselves in terms of our connections with other people. Perhaps the original question should be re-phrased as follows: To what extent do people in a technological society need expensive, energy-intensive things to symbolize their identity? In other words, perhaps it is not the basic values that have changed, but only their forms of expression. But even this does not seem true. The significance of objects is not directly related to their extrinsic value. Old photographs, books, plants, old china and glassware are still among the favorite conveyors of meaning for the people we interviewed. Many of the paintings mentioned were made by children or friends.

In one respect the patterns differ markedly from what one might have found in a sample of a different culture or a different age. The significant objects people mentioned were rarely ready-made cultural symbols: icons, crucifixes, flags, coats of arms, ancestral shrines, were conspicuous by their absence. Yet there were plenty of objects that *performed the same function*; but these objects were invested with meaning because of the personal experiences of the respondent, and not only because they were programmed by the culture. Thus the meanings people create in their lives nowadays are probably more idiosyncratic and fragile, as well as being more original and spontaneous, than they ever were before.

It would seem that the central values in our lives can be expressed by objects that are important because of their personal meaning, not just because of their exchange value. In fact, many people remarked that the

object they were naming was actually "junk", with little financial value, like an old couch. Yet the *average* American owns enough items of financial value that he or she would be considered very wealthy in most countries. We seem to have an idea that we need to consume an enormous number of objects to have the basics of life. When we reflect on what our most cherished possessions are, however, it turns out that the bulk of consumer items is excluded.

There could be a liberating message in these results. The exponential rate of consumption is a habit that could be broken without affecting the central meanings in people's lives. We still feel that life makes sense if we can show to ourselves and others what we can do, and if we know that there are people who care for us and for whom we care. Things that express this are dear to us, the rest are expendable.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is associate professor in the Department of Behavioral Sciences, Human Development, and in the College. Eugene Rochberg-Halton is a doctoral student in Human Development.
