



The Psychology of Collecting *By Mark B. McKinley, Ed.D* Everybody is a Collector Everybody collects something! Whether it be photographs of a person's vacation, ticket stubs from ballgames, souvenirs of trips, pictures of one's children, athletes' trophies, kid's report cards, and those who collect "junk" (pack-rats) and dispose of it in garage sales.

The Evolution of Collecting On the more formal side of "collecting," it does seem that growing up as "kids," we all collected something we made into a hobby. It could have begun with baseball cards, marbles, or stamps. Then this collecting urge morphed on/ into to all sorts of "things." In the past collectors pursued their collectibles in estate-sales, garage sales, pawn shops, flea markets, but today the marketplace for collectors is eBay, the online auction website, where such "things" sold/bought include everything from a man's kidney, a town, a grilled cheese sandwich with an image of the Virgin Mary, a MIG fighter jet to the more mundane collectibles (Note: the numbers in parentheses represents the number of "results" in the USA's eBay as of mid-November 2010): antique books (873,862), baskets (152,134), state quarters (138,704), clocks (169,389), autographs, as in politicians, movie stars, athletes (306,430), or patches*, as in police/fire, armed forces, national parks (452,641), pins as in hat, flag, lapel (873,862). For other collectors, it was collecting the really unusual that worked best for them. People actually collect: bad poetry (32), barbed wire (2,601), knock-knock jokes (130), wax paper liners out of cereal boxes (1), swizzle sticks (1,563), string (155,664), mouse pads (56,618), phone books (1,701), type fonts (191), or Mersenne primes (284). Indeed, some collectors even collect collecting guides 4,550)! And, speaking of the unusual, what about the names for the people who collect things? An Archtophilist collects teddy bears, an Oologist collects bird's eggs, a Deltiologist collects postcards, a Numismatist collects coins, a Vecturist collects subway tokens, Patch collecting is called Scutelliphily, and a clock collector is a Horologist. Possibly Noah was the most famous collector of all. After all, he collected two of every living animal and housed them in one place! During the 1700s and 1800s there were aristocratic collectors, the landed gentry, who roamed the world in search of fossils, shells, zoological specimens, works of art, and books. The collected artifacts were then kept in special rooms ("cabinets of curiosities") for safekeeping and private viewing. A "cabinet" was, in part, a

symbolic display of the collector's power and wealth. It was these collectors who established the first museums in Europe, and to a lesser extent in America. * Patches/badges/emblems have been collected since the times of "Greeks and Romans." Medieval Christians marked their attendance at shrines with metal patches. As travel became more widespread, particularly the early 20th Century, "vacationers" were looking for and collecting patches as souvenirs/memories of where-they-had-been.

The Motivations to Collect Why do we collect things, e.g., Cracker Jack toys to manhole covers? Some people collect for investment, yet one must wonder how a penny can become worth thousands of dollars. Some collect for pure enjoyment--- it is fun! Some collect to expand their social lives, attending swap meets or Internet forums and exchanging information with like-minded souls. And still other folks collect to preserve the past, but there can be risk here. Medical scientists, anthropologists collected human remains for the purpose of study. Yet, the courts have been called into the fray as to who is the proper "owner" of the past, e.g., the Kennewick Man---archaeologists legally fight to study the bones, whereas, Native Americans legally fight to bury them. For some people collecting is simply the quest, in some cases, a life-long pursuit that is never complete. Additional collector motivations include psychological security, filling a void in a sense of self (Who am I?). Or, it could be to claim a means to distinction, much as uniforms make the "man." Collections could be a means to immortality or fame vis a vis Dr. Louis Leakey. For some, the satisfaction comes from experimenting with arranging, re-arranging, and classifying parts of a-big-world-out-there, which can serve as a means of control to elicit a comfort zone in one's life, e.g., calming fears, erasing insecurity. The motives are not mutually exclusive, as certainly many motives can combine to create a collector---one does not eat just because of hunger!

Collecting vs. Hoarding Sigmund Freud didn't see collecting as stemming from these kinds of motivations. He postulated that collecting ties back to the time of toilet training, of course. Freud suggested that the loss of control and what went down the toilet was a traumatic occurrence and that, therefore, the collector is trying to gain back not only control but "possessions" that were lost so many years ago. Well that's Freud. While Freud may clearly have overstated the issue, his explanation serves as a nice segue into the dark-side of "collecting," the psychopathological form described as hoarding. The "abnormality" of the hoarder shows up in those instances where the aberrant behavior interferes with an otherwise "reasonable life." This can sometimes even include gross interference with the lives of others, even leading to enforcement issues. Some theorists suggest that the behavior associated with hoarding can be an extreme variation on compulsive buying. Compulsive buying, in turn, is closely related to major depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and in particular, compulsive hoarding. According to a study by Kyrios, Frost and Steketee, compulsive buying is thought to be influenced by a range of cognitive domains including deficits in decision-making, emotional attachments to objects, and erroneous beliefs about possessions, and other maladaptive beliefs. Some "experts" have described the psychopathology of hoarding as "Repetitive Acquisition Syndrome."

Hoarding As Pathology Probably the extreme illustration of this is the person who harms others in his/her passion for “collecting.” Such extreme pathology is referenced by “animal or people hoarders.” The former is the person who we read about in the local paper with a headline that reads: “Local Woman Found with 100s of Filthy, Diseased, Malnourished Cats.” On the other hand, there are those collectors who collect people, as in serial killers. Movies such as “The Collector,” and “The Bone Collector,” “Kiss the Girls” portray such persons in a context of a thrilling mystery brought to the entertainment of movie goers. In extreme instances of aberrant collecting what is one to do? “Dr. Phil,” The TV mental health guru Philip McGraw, came to Amherst, Ohio to video and “heal” a Mr. Mishak who had a 10-year accumulation of “collectibles” that ranged from old cereal boxes, windows, toothpaste tubes, to dead cats. Dr. Phil interpreted Mr. Mishak’s problem as “compulsive hoarding” that served as a coping mechanism for managing anxiety and fear of losing control. The proposed “therapy” was to provide a convoy of six big-rigs to haul away the “collectibles” Accompanying the trucks was a requisite Dr. Phil TV crew. Since researchers have not agreed on the accountabilities for the pathology of collecting, therapies have had limited success with such persons. We do not yet know the full outcome of Dr. Phil’s “therapy.”

References: 1. Jeffery Kluger, “Who Should Own the Bones?” Time, March 13, 2006, from

<http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,1169901,00.html>

(April 4, 2006) 2. Kyrios, M., Frost R.O. Steketee G., “Cognitions in Compulsive Buying and Acquisition,” (Kluwer Academic Publishers, April 2004), 28: 241-258. 3. Hawk, Jason, “Dr. Phil Confronts...,” Amherst New Times, Wednesday, February 8, 2006.

About the Author

Dr. Mark B. McKinley is Professor of Psychology at Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio.