

Inalienable Wealth in Forster's *Howards End*

In my presentation, I will focus on inherited objects in E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910). My main focus will be on how Forster portrays inheritance in Edwardian England and it is my claim that *Howards End* can be read as Forster's attempt to rescue the 'society of inheritance' (concept borrowed from Thomas Piketty) by moving the focus from inherited wealth to inherited values. My analysis is focusing on the house of Howards End in particular and I will argue that the house is an 'inalienable object'. I have borrowed the concept of inalienable objects from anthropology and I have attached an article about the concept written by Carolyn Folkman Curasi, Linda L. Price and Eric J. Arnould. I have, furthermore, selected some short text passages to illustrate some of the points, I will make in my presentation.

For those of you who have not read the novel, I have also attached a plot summary from Wikipedia.

References

Curasi, Carolyn Folkman, Linda L. Price & Eric J. Arnould, "How Individuals' Cherished Possessions Become Families' Inalienable Wealth," *Journal of Consumer Research* Vol. 31 (December 2004): 609-622

Forster, E. M., *Howards End*, London: Penguin English Library, 2012.

Piketty, Thomas, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014

Quotes

Chapter 3

“She [Ruth Wilcox] seemed to belong not to the young people and their motor, but to the house, and to the tree that overshadowed it. One knew that she worshipped the past, and that the instinctive wisdom the past can alone bestow had descended upon her – that wisdom to which we give the clumsy name of aristocracy. High born she might not be. But assuredly she cared about her ancestors, and let them help her.” p 21

Chapter 7

“I'm [Margaret Wilcox] tired of these rich people who pretend to be poor, and think it shows a nice mind to ignore the piles of money that keep their feet above the waves. I stand each year upon six hundred pounds, and Helen upon the same, and Tibby will stand upon eight, and as fast as our pounds crumble away into the sea they are renewed--from the sea, yes, from the sea. And all our thoughts are the thoughts of six-hundred-pounders, and all our speeches; and because we don't want to steal umbrellas ourselves, we forget that below the sea people do want to steal them, and do steal them sometimes, and that what's a joke up here is down there reality--" p 61

Chapter 11

“Charles took two letters, and read them as he followed the procession. The first was a covering note from the matron. Mrs. Wilcox had desired her, when the funeral should be over, to forward the enclosed. The enclosed--it was from his mother herself. She had written: "To my husband: I should like Miss Schlegel (Margaret) to have Howards End." pp 99-100

“It was not legal; it had been written in illness, and under the spell of a sudden friendship; it was contrary to the dead woman's intentions in the past, contrary to her very nature, so far as that nature was understood by them [The Wilcoxes]. To them Howards End was a house: they could not know that to her it had been a spirit, for which she sought a spiritual heir.” p 102

"The incident made a most painful impression on them. Grief mounted into the brain and worked there disquietingly. Yesterday they had lamented: "She was a dear mother, a true wife: in our absence she neglected her health and died." Today they thought: "She was not as true, as dear, as we supposed." The desire for a more inward light had found expression at last, the unseen had impacted on the scene, and all that they could say was "Treachery." Mrs. Wilcox had been treacherous to the family, to the laws of property, to her own written word. How did she expect Howards End to be conveyed to Miss Schlegel? Was her husband, to whom it legally belonged, to make it over to her as a free gift? Was she said Miss Schlegel to have a life interest in it, or to own it absolutely? Was there to be no compensation for the garage and other improvements that they had made under the assumption that all would be theirs some day? Treacherous! treacherous and absurd! When we think the dead both treacherous and absurd, we have gone far towards reconciling ourselves to their departure. That note, scribbled in pencil, sent through the matron, was unbusinesslike as well as cruel, and decreased at once the value of the woman who had written it."

...

"Mother couldn't have meant it," said Evie, still frowning.

"No, my girl, of course not."

"Mother believed so in ancestors too--it isn't like her to leave anything to an outsider, who'd never appreciate. "

"The whole thing is unlike her," he announced. "If Miss Schlegel had been poor, if she had wanted a house, I could understand it a little. But she has a house of her own. Why should she want another? She wouldn't have any use of Howards End." pp 102-103

Chapter 17

"The Age of Property holds bitter moments even for a proprietor. When a move is imminent, furniture becomes ridiculous, and Margaret now lay awake at nights wondering where, where on earth they and all their belongings would be deposited in September next. Chairs, tables, pictures, books, that had rumbled down to them through the generations, must rumble forward again like a slide of rubbish to which she longed to give the final push, and send toppling into the sea. But there were all their father's books--they never read them, but they were their father's, and must be

kept. There was the marble-topped chiffonier--their mother had set store by it, they could not remember why. Round every knob and cushion in the house sentiment gathered, a sentiment that was at times personal, but more often a faint piety to the dead, a prolongation of rites that might have ended at the grave.

It was absurd, if you came to think of it; Helen and Tibby came to think of it: Margaret was too busy with the house-agents. The feudal ownership of land did bring dignity, whereas the modern ownership of movables is reducing us again to a nomadic horde. We are reverting to the civilization of luggage, and historians of the future will note how the middle classes accreted possessions without taking root in the earth, and may find in this the secret of their imaginative poverty. The Schlegels were certainly the poorer for the loss of Wickham Place. It had helped to balance their lives, and almost to counsel them. Nor is their ground-landlord spiritually the richer. He has built flats on its site, his motor-cars grow swifter, his exposures of Socialism more trenchant. But he has spilt the precious distillation of the years, and no chemistry of his can give it back to society again.”
p 156

Chapter 17

She [Margaret] had been his wife's friend, and, as such, he [Henry Wilcox] had given her that silver vinaigrette as a memento. It was pretty of him to have given that vinaigrette, and he had always preferred her to Helen--unlike most men. p 163

Chapter 18

“The dining-room was big, but over-furnished. Chelsea would have moaned aloud. Mr. Wilcox had eschewed those decorative schemes that wince, and relent, and refrain, and achieve beauty by sacrificing comfort and pluck. After so much self-colour and self-denial, Margaret viewed with relief the sumptuous dado, the frieze, the gilded wall-paper, amid whose foliage parrots sang. It would never do with her own furniture, but those heavy chairs, that immense side-board loaded with presentation plate, stood up against its pressure like men. The room suggested men, and Margaret, keen to derive the modern capitalist from the warriors and hunters of the past, saw it as an ancient guest-hall, where the lord sat at meat among his thanes. Even the Bible--the Dutch Bible that Charles had brought back from the Boer War--fell into position. Such a room admitted loot.

"Now the entrance-hall." The entrance-hall was paved. "Here we fellows smoke." We fellows smoked in chairs of maroon leather. It was as if a motor-car had spawned." p 170

Chapter 37

"But this place has wonderful powers.' [Margaret says] 'What do you mean?' 'I don't know.' 'Because I probably agree with you.' 'It kills what is dreadful and makes what is beautiful live.' 'I do agree,' said Helen, as she sipped the milk. 'But you said that the house was dead not half an hour ago.' 'Meaning that I was dead. I felt it.' 'Yes, the house has a surer life than we, even if it was empty, and, as it is, I can't get over that for thirty years the sun has never shone full on our furniture. After all, Wickham Place was a grave. Meg, I've a startling idea.'" p 315

Plot summary

The story revolves around three families in England at the beginning of the 20th century: the Wilcoxes, rich capitalists with a fortune made in the Colonies; the half-German Schlegel siblings (Margaret, Tibby, and Helen), whose cultural pursuits have much in common with the real-life Bloomsbury Group; and the Basts, an impoverished young couple from a lower-class background. The idealistic, intelligent Schlegel sisters seek both to help the struggling Basts and to rid the Wilcoxes of some of their deep-seated social and economic prejudices.

The Schlegels had briefly met and befriended the Wilcoxes when both families were touring Germany. Helen, the younger Schlegel daughter, then visits the Wilcoxes at their country house, Howards End. There, she is romantically attracted to the younger Wilcox son, Paul; they get engaged in haste but soon regret their decision. The engagement is consequently broken off by mutual consent, despite a somewhat awkward intervention by Helen's Aunt Juley.

Later that year, the Wilcoxes move to London, taking an apartment very near the Schlegels' home. Margaret Schlegel befriends the Wilcox matriarch, Ruth. Howards End is Ruth's most prized personal possession; she feels a strong connection to its values and history. However, her husband and children do not share her feeling for the old house. Perceiving that Margaret is a kindred spirit, Ruth invites her to visit Howards End, but due to various circumstances, the visit does not happen.

Margaret is unaware both that Ruth is gravely ill and that Ruth regards her as an ideal owner of Howards End after she passes away. On her deathbed, Ruth writes a note bequeathing Howards End to Margaret. When the widowed Henry Wilcox reads this note, it causes him great consternation and anxiety. Henry and his children burn the note without telling Margaret anything about her inheritance.

A few years later, Henry Wilcox and Margaret Schlegel renew their acquaintance. Their friendship blossoms into romance and in due course, Henry proposes to Margaret and she accepts. It is apparent that their personalities could not be more different. The courageous, idealistic, compassionate, high-minded and romantically inclined Margaret tries to get the rigid, unsentimental, staunchly rational Henry to open up more, to little effect. Henry's children do not look upon her engagement to their father with a friendly eye. Evie, the daughter, soon to be married herself, is largely concerned with her own affairs, whereas Paul, the younger son, now lives and works in Nigeria. The main opposition comes from the elder son, Charles, and his wife Dolly, who are civil enough to conceal their hostility to Margaret, yet really see her as an intruder, posing a threat to their own ambitions. Most of all, they fear any claim she could one day have to Howards End.

Meanwhile, the sisters encourage Leonard Bast, an acquaintance of theirs, to quit his job as a clerk and seek employment elsewhere, having learned from Henry that the insurance company Leonard works for is likely to go bankrupt. A few weeks later, Henry reverses his opinion, but it's too late. Leonard has already resigned his modest yet safe position, thereby losing whatever precarious hold he had on financial security, and his subsequent job-seeking efforts have come to naught. An additional complication is that Leonard is married to Jacky, a troubled, vulnerable "fallen" woman for whom he feels responsible. Helen continues to try to help him, ostensibly out of guilt for having interfered with his life in the first place, but also perhaps because she is secretly attracted to him. Soon, however, it all goes terribly wrong. Helen encounters the starving Basts and, appalled by the state they are in, brings them to Evie Wilcox's garden wedding, whereupon Henry recognizes Jacky as his former mistress. He flees from the scene, breaking off his engagement to Margaret. His first thought is that the Schlegels and Basts have concocted a dark plot to entrap and expose him; but he later calms down and tells Margaret the truth. Ten years previously, when he was on business in Cyprus, he seduced Jacky and then carelessly abandoned her as soon as it suited him to

do so, leaving her on foreign soil with no money and no way to return home. Margaret, dreadfully disturbed by this, confronts Henry about his ill-treatment of Jacky. Henry is embarrassed and ashamed but unrepentant. Such are the ways of the world, to his mind. Margaret is still very much in love and, wishing to save the relationship, forgives him. Henry and Margaret realize they must put the past behind them in order to make peace with each other and plan their own future together.

The Schlegel sisters drift apart, partly because of Margaret's impending marriage into the Wilcox family, partly because of Helen's profound disapproval of Henry's treatment of the Bastis. Much distressed by what she has heard from Leonard about the circumstances of Henry's acquaintance with Jacky in Cyprus, she is overwhelmed by love and pity for him; indeed she sees Leonard as a strikingly altruistic and romantic figure whose struggle throughout life bears the mark of heroism. Helen and Leonard are thrown together in an atmosphere of great anguish and succumb to their feelings of mutual passion. Finding herself pregnant, Helen leaves England, travelling to Germany in order to hide her condition, but later returns to England upon receiving news that Aunt Juley is ill. She refuses to meet her sister face-to-face but is tricked by Margaret, who, following Henry's suggestion, had traveled to Howards End, where Helen's belongings are kept. Having correctly guessed that Helen would wish to retrieve them, she surprises her sister by appearing on the scene unannounced. Henry and Margaret had planned an intervention with a doctor, presuming Helen's evasive behavior was a sign of emotional instability or even mental illness. However, as soon as they encounter Helen at Howards End, they see her true condition for themselves.

Margaret decides it is her duty to stand by her sister and help her. She tries in vain to convince Henry that if she can forgive his own transgression, he should by the same token forgive Helen hers. Henry, strongly indignant, remains unconvinced. At this point, Leonard arrives at Howards End, still tormented by the affair and wishing to speak to Margaret. He is not aware of Helen's presence there, having lost contact with her ever since refusing her offer to assist him financially. Charles Wilcox then bursts upon the scene and, in an effort to ingratiate himself with his father, attacks Leonard for purportedly "insulting" Helen. He strikes Leonard with the flat edge of a heavy old German sword which had belonged to Margaret's father. Leonard grabs onto a nearby bookcase, which collapses in a heap on top of him. Tragically, his weak heart fails and he dies on the spot.

Margaret assumes responsibility for this turn of events and sides with Helen and the dead Leonard, informing Henry of her intention to leave him.

Charles Wilcox is found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to three years in prison. The scandal and its repercussions have a profound effect on Henry, causing him to take a good look at his life and examine his conscience. He learns the value of empathy and begins to connect with others. Writing a new will, he bequeaths Howards End to Margaret, as his deceased first wife Ruth had wished. He further stipulates that after Margaret's own death the property will go to her nephew, the son of Helen and Leonard. Helen is warmly reconciled with Margaret and Henry. Fully supported by them, she decides to bring up her son at Howards End. The scene of the tragedy is therefore revealed as a place of poetic justice and ultimate redemption. Margaret has resolved the conflict by making a complex, thoughtful, remarkably noble moral choice to stand by her sister, while at the same time reversing her decision to leave her husband. Indeed, by staying married to Henry, lovingly supporting him through his own hour of need, she acts as a uniting force, bringing all the elements peacefully together. The future is ostensibly happy, as the open-minded, forward-looking idealism of the Schlegels is balanced and integrated with the healthy drive and essential pragmatism of the Wilcoxes, each side learning tremendous lessons from the other through a vital process of discord brought into harmony. Leonard Bast, representative of the lower middle class, is problematically written out. However, his son with Helen is set to inherit Howards End from the Wilcox family, thereby making some amends for the tragedy.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howards_End



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Author(s): Carolyn Folkman Curasi, Linda L. Price and Eric J. Arnould

Source: *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (December 2004), pp. 609-622

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/425096>

Accessed: 05-02-2018 13:28 UTC

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How Individuals' Cherished Possessions Become Families' Inalienable Wealth

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This article examines a special category of objects, things that people should not give or sell, but keep from generation to generation within the close confines of a group—inalienable wealth. Previous findings about inalienable wealth are restricted to studies of indigenous cultures by anthropologists. We explore whether and how objects pass from alienable to inalienable status across generations of middle-class North American families. Our research distinguishes families' inalienable wealth from individuals' cherished possessions and keepsakes in terms of the role of caretakers, the behavioral dynamics of guardianship, temporal orientation, shared significance, and distinctive semiotic qualities.

Our focus is possessions that people should not give or sell but keep within the confines of a close group—inalienable wealth (Godelier 1999; Weiner 1992). These items hold an imaginary power over a group and embody an understanding that requires their possessors to keep these objects within their group's membership. Examples, in declining order of social scale, include national historic treasures, tribal lands, religious relics, clan totems, and, perhaps, family heirlooms (Geary 1986; Goux 1991; Weiner 1994). Our specific purpose is to explore whether and how objects pass from alienable to inalienable status across generations of middle-class families in North America. We are interested in the metamorphosis of individuals' cherished possessions into families' inalienable objects—possessions kin believe to be irreplaceable, sacred,

and kept from the market. Inalienable wealth theory derives from societies different from middle-class America. Nonetheless, some research hints at parallels between families' cherished objects and inalienable wealth (Cours et al. 1999; Finch and Mason 2000; Marcoux 2001; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000), and resistance to fungibility of objects imbued with symbolic-relational significance such as that provided in close-knit networks (McGraw, Tetlock, and Kristel 2003).

Our research draws a theoretical distinction between an individual's cherished possessions and irreplaceable, cherished possessions of a kinship group. In addition, through a multigenerational analysis, it charts how cherished possessions become inalienable. Here, we briefly distinguish some key terms. Cherished or special possessions are treated independent of their exchange value, and private or personal meanings are central to their worth. These possessions attract psychic energy—consumers cultivate and invest attention and layer meanings on these objects (Grayson and Shulman 2000; Richins 1994). Because special possessions attract psychic energy, consumers often view them as sacred, “regarded as more significant, powerful, and extraordinary than the self” (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989, p. 13). Research has distinguished among cherished possessions in terms of public or private and replaceable or irreplaceable meanings (Grayson and Shulman 2000; Richins 1994). For example, cherished objects may have only private meanings or may combine public and private meanings (Richins 1994). Both replaceable and irreplaceable cherished objects may be sacred and imbued with special symbolic-relational significance (McGraw et al. 2003). However, by contrast with replaceable possessions, irreplaceable possessions provide a physical (evidentiary) association with a time, place, or person, that is, a corporally

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indexical association (Grayson and Shulman 2000). An important category of irreplaceable cherished possessions is objects given or bequeathed from an older to a younger generation, sometimes referred to as “keepsakes.” Inheritors of keepsakes often imply previous owners’ qualities contaminate these items (Belk et al. 1989; McCracken 1988; Price et al. 2000; Unruh 1983). Keepsakes are indexical symbols, items with an evidentiary function, able to serve as a testament to important life events (Grayson and Shulman 2000), of immediate descendants’ relationships with their deceased kinsfolk (Belk 1990), and provide vehicles for creating, shaping, and sustaining memories (Finch and Mason 2000). In part because of the salience of corporally indexical associations, researchers question whether keepsakes can and will be retained by future generations and do not theorize keepsakes’ transformation into multigenerational family possessions (Finch and Mason 2000; McCracken 1988; Price et al. 2000). At the same time, research shows that older generations target gifts and bequests (especially irreplaceable cherished possessions) in the hope that these “keepsakes” will become inalienable—objects that stay in the family (Price et al. 2000).

This research explores whether cherished keepsake objects from one generation of consumers become irreplaceable cherished possessions for a group of descendants, and if so, how. Building on Grayson and Shulman (2000), and Price et al. (2000), this research distinguishes inalienable objects from other cherished and sacred objects by their imaginary power over a group and the social logic that requires the group over which they hold sway to keep these objects, that is, withhold them from exchange (Godelier 1999; McGraw et al. 2003). Thus, we are interested in possessions viewed as irreplaceable not by an individual but by a kin group.

We now turn to our literature review and organize it around two questions: What defines inalienable wealth? What is its place in contemporary families in North America? A description of our research activity then follows. Next, we outline our findings and conclude with implications for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What Is Inalienable Wealth?

The literature on inalienable wealth reveals a diversity of perspectives. We identify six constructive starting points from prior literature for this inquiry that also help to define inalienable wealth. First, like other sacred objects, inalienable possessions exhibit hierophancy (capacity for expounding sacred mysteries; Belk et al. 1989) but of a particular rather than a universal kind. Inalienable possessions collect and make tangible domestic history, family ancestors’ achievements, special events, and mythologies, collapsing and injecting them into contemporary group and individual identity (Weiner 1985, 1992).

Second, inalienable wealth objectifies distinction. At contrast with other forms of distinction offered by sacred ob-

jects, inalienable wealth becomes priceless and people hold it out from exchange because it speaks to and for a group identity in which individuals or a group may participate. In so doing, inalienable wealth sacralizes felt differences between members of one group and another (Weiner 1992). Thus, even if a group suffers subjugation or slavery, retention of inalienable objects preserves the promise of group emancipation (Godelier 1999). Further, because intergenerational transmission and retention of impartible inalienable possessions within groups favors some individuals over others, possession produces intragroup and social hierarchy (Mosko 2000; Weiner 1992). Thus, only one person at a time can caretake the precious family Bible.

A third necessary condition of inalienability is that group members must accept and share the social order legitimated by inalienable possessions. Although often neglected in discussions of the sacred, their embedding in specific local social networks is central to the power and meaning of inalienable possessions (Kozinets 2002; Weiner 1992). Members of the group share sacred meanings that paradoxically may resist explicit expression (Godelier 1999).

Fourth, one reason inalienable wealth plays a powerful role in legitimating identity is because its origins are mysterious. Its origins are thought to lie “outside the human world, in some sacred, changeless order, and changeless because it is sacred” (Godelier 1999, p. 124; Pannell 1994). Durkheim argued that society is the ultimate source of the sacred, a position implicit in treatment of the sacred in consumer research (Belk et al. 1989). But inalienable objects typically become detached in space and/or time in such a way that their historic origins fade into the background, replaced by imagined supernatural powers legitimated through family stories and myths (Godelier 1999).

Fifth, unlike commodities sacralized through consumer practices (Belk et al. 1989), individuals may possess but not own inalienable wealth. Ownership is an alienable construct, entangled with rights to give and sell (Pannell 1994; Radin 1993). Ancestors, deities, the family, or the clan retain ultimate rights over inalienable objects. Consequently, caretakers merely enjoy use rights in inalienable wealth. They should not sell it except for extraordinary reasons, for instance, if group survival is at risk (e.g., McGraw et al. 2003). Hence, the moment of intergenerational transmission, when a group passes an object forward, is dangerous. Here the prospects for disposition and loss loom large.

Sixth, inalienable wealth, like other sacred objects, exhibits kratophony—an expression of power, but in the case of inalienable wealth the power accrues to a group. Caretakers fear loss of inalienable possessions, not for themselves alone but for their group. Loss, whether through forgetting, theft, or market alienation, entails a loss of identity, authority, and mythology. Indigenous people describe the loss of an inalienable object as “the most serious evil which could befall a group” (Pannell 1994, p. 28). In a sense, the loss of inalienable objects may forewarn of a group’s devastation or extinction (Kirsch 2001; Radin 1993).

At the same time, at the risk of loss or damage, caretakers

can and must share with group members the positive effects that emanate from inalienable possessions (Godelier 1999). This quality further differentiates inalienable wealth from other sacred possessions identified in the consumer research literature. Custodians of inalienable wealth preserve and share the objects and the knowledge that goes with them. So that they can bear or name and socialize a future custodian, caretakers are often exempt from some ordinary social responsibilities and gifted with reproductive opportunities (Godelier 1999).

Objects' intrinsic attributes do not differentiate alienable and inalienable possessions. Changing social functions, uses, and meanings govern objects' movement between these statuses (Godelier 1999; Weiss 1997). From a longitudinal perspective, the boundary between the two types of objects is porous. Kopytoff (1986) showed that an object may be sold, and then given as a gift, later preserved as inalienable, and still later passed back into the alienable domain. In changed circumstances, objects given or sold may become objects that should be kept.

Does Inalienable Wealth Play a Role in Contemporary Families in North America?

Data and debate about inalienable wealth is primarily derived from ethnographies of indigenous people. Inalienable wealth in these relatively geographically circumscribed, socially homogeneous societies involves totemic objects representative of large social segments (Lévi-Strauss 1962). In these societies, possession of inalienable objects entails positive consequences for group cohesion, identity, continuity, and prestige. Could the construct of inalienable wealth apply in less geographically rooted, contemporary North American families enmeshed in market relationships (Giles-Vernick 1999; Richards 1996)?

Contemporary Families. Contemporary families are different from groups described in previous research on inalienable wealth. An accelerated tendency for people to construct their families out of diverse households and sets of relationships developing at disparate times and contexts is shown by the sharp rise in the number of blended family households in the United States (Morgan 1996; Smart and Neale 1999). Great diversity of experience of family life is now common, and several sets of potential kin link a growing proportion of children and adults (Finch and Mason 2000; Smart and Neale 1999; Stacey 1990). Consumer researchers' recognition of this dynamism may be what leads them to postulate a weakened role for heirlooms in contemporary families (Belk et al. 1989; McCracken 1988). However, many contemporary consumers still want to believe that they belong to a kin group that works and to feel they contribute actively to it (Finch and Mason 2000; Miller 1998; Smart and Neale 1999). Family identity, or what the family represents in the minds of its members, remains a strong force that mitigates change and encourages cultural continuity (Bennett, Wolin, and McAvity 1988). Family rituals such as rites of passage, reunions, and calendrical rit-

uals, for instance, are enduring, affectively charged sources of family and self-identity that are still featured in newspaper accounts and expressed in personal narrative (McGlone, Park, and Smith 1998; Morgan 1996; Neville 1984; Otnes and Pleck 2003; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

Keepsakes and Heirlooms. Social science has long recognized family as crucial to the reproduction of social systems. Transmission of domestic property in particular expresses the boundaries of kin groups and power within those boundaries (Finch and Mason 2000; Marcus and Hall 1992; Rosenfeld 1979). Several studies claim that transmission of special possessions within families in late modern consumer culture is significant. Finch and Mason (2000) observe that their British interviewees seemed more engaged emotionally with inherited individual keepsakes (often objects of no value) than with monetary resources. Individuals in families they studied displayed a clear stake in the symbolic significance of these items. A second study insists on the salience and hedonic significance of keepsake and inherited objects to U.S. consumers (Cours et al. 1999; Heisley, Cours, and Wallendorf 1997). This research is ambiguous regarding ownership versus mere possession of keepsakes and heirlooms. Newspaper accounts often echo the significance of inherited "family treasures" (Moore 2003). A third study details the reasons why and the ways in which older consumers distribute special possessions to descendent kin in middle-class American families (Price et al. 2000). These authors show that older consumers select a limited set of cherished objects for transmission to their heirs and adopt a number of strategies to transfer both the objects and their meanings to targeted heirs. Thus, Price et al. (2000) identify consumer yearnings to create inalienable wealth. They do not explore whether or how they succeed in doing so as the present research does.

Previous studies have broached the concept of familial guardianship and identified the kin keeper role (Rosenthal 1985). Kin keepers keep track of family business within extended kin networks. Subsequently, the concept has been employed primarily in discussions of intergenerational family care giving (e.g., Gerstel and Gallagher 1993; Lye 1996). Its consumer dimensions are undeveloped. In consumer research, from a single case study, McCracken (1988, p. 49) identified the "curatorial consumer," charged with the conservation of a family "archive" of heirloom possessions. The curatorial consumer is similar to Rosenthal's kin keeper. Curatorial consumption is a "pattern of consumption in which an individual treats his or her [inherited] possessions as having strong mnemonic value, and entertains a sense of responsibility to these possessions that enjoins their conservation, display, and safe transmission." However, McCracken (1988, p. 44) disparages the significance of his construct, improperly generalizing that his informant represents "a pattern that has almost completely disappeared from modern North America." By contrast, Rogan (1998) finds ongoing evidence of this behavior pattern among rural Norwegians, although "in a moderate form." The present

research elucidates family curation or guardianship of inherited special possessions.

In summary, the focus of our research is on whether and how individual keepsakes gifted or bequeathed by a familial older generation, rich with indexical value, become irreplaceable possessions for a kinship group—that is, inalienable. Prior research demonstrates that individuals yearn to transform their individual cherished possessions into family heirlooms preserved in perpetuity and that they strategize through gifts and bequests to keep objects in the family for at least one more generation (Price et al. 2000). Prior research combines the categories of keepsakes and family heirlooms and describes them as sometimes sacred, material anchors for self identity, indexical symbols of relationships with deceased kinfolk, and vehicles for creating, shaping, and sustaining memories (Finch and Mason 2000). Although not wrong, this research does not theorize the supra-individual, social dimensions of heirlooms that we propose. Research on heirlooms does not investigate whether keepsakes can successfully transform into multigenerational symbols. Only the multigeneration examination of family heirloom meanings described next can speak to these issues.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY

Data Collection

The interpretive methods employed in this investigation provide multiple generational perspectives on the social construction of family possessions. Kinship and social class provide the sampling frame boundaries for this investigation. Kinship is the predominant pattern of wealth transference in the United States and the middle-class make up the largest segment of North American consumers (65%–70% of the population; Schneider 1980). Interviews with multiple generations examine whether and how cherished possessions are kept within families across different generations.

Consistent with the idea that contemporary families have an elective quality, the families in this research exhibit numerous divorces, remarriages, deaths, and elements of discord. More than half of our informants talked about at least one divorce. Some families live in close geographic proximity, but others live apart, and most have moved one or more times. Although the majority of our informants currently reside in the southeastern United States, interviews also tapped informants living in Ohio, Illinois, New York, and California. Most of our informants live in urban areas, but a small number live in smaller rural communities. We represent a wide spectrum of white ethnic backgrounds and include families that have lived in the United States for several generations and families that immigrated within the past two generations. A few of our informants are middle-class African Americans, and a few have Spanish as a first language. Overall, our informant families have experienced upward or stable economic circumstances. We did not interview informants whose families are worse off now than a generation ago.

Our investigation is naturalistic, conducted in the inform-

ants' homes (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988). We employed depth interviews to understand informants' emic lived experience with inherited objects (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Interviewing began in spring 1997 and continued through spring 2000. Data collection continued until new interviews produced only minor thematic variations from previous interviews (McQuarrie 1993). Depth interviews with 38 informants within 15 family groups, representing 26 intergenerational dyads make up the primary data set for this project. The first and second authors, who have numerous years of experience with this technique, conducted the interviews that lasted from 1 to several hours. Seven informants were interviewed on at least two occasions to address specific questions that arose during analysis and interpretation. Multiple dyads within a family were interviewed, providing diverse perspectives on particular possessions. We identified and interviewed additional dyads whenever we identified new problems or insights, in order to resolve questions of fact and interpretation. Another set of 70 semistructured interviews, representing 35 intergenerational dyads spread between males and females of three generations, supplemented our primary set of interviews. Consistent with previous household research (Price et al. 2000; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), after extensive instruction, coaching, and practice interviews, 41 trained undergraduate interviewers conducted these in-home interviews. They ranged between 35 min. and 90 min. in length. In about half of the cases, the interviewers and the informants were close kin.

Semistructured interviews associated with this data set began with a discussion of objects inherited from family members and included questions about the meanings, uses, and known histories of these objects, including how informants acquired the objects. If informants did not mention future plans for the object, we probed to see whether they had future plans and, if so, what these plans might be. We also probed about objects they hoped to inherit and about whether and what objects they hoped to pass on to younger or future family members.

Interviews met established guidelines for ensuring informant rights and guaranteeing informant confidentiality and were approved by our university's institutional review board. We obtained permission before sharing participant information with other family members. All informants granted permission to the researchers without hesitation. We did not share information with any family member that might be sensitive or painful to any informant. We can report no instance of our interviews provoking family conflict.

Analysis

Although students played a role in collecting some data, they were not involved in any way in the current analysis or reporting of the research. As the data collection progressed, the senior researchers examined the transcribed interviews for emergent categories and patterns. Typical of interpretive methods, additional categories emerged as the

investigation progressed, reflecting the increasing complexity of our understanding of the research topic and of the data collected. We employed three types of analyses: analyses focused on an informant, between informants within a family, and between informants across our sample of middle-class Americans (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Thompson 1997).

Within-Informant Analyses. We examined informant stories about objects they had inherited, objects they hoped they would inherit, and objects they cherished and hoped their family would preserve and pass forward. Consistent with prior research, we define stories as a narrated sequence of events including a protagonist; obstacles to be dealt with, a beginning, a middle, and an end; and some moral point or counsel (Riessman 1993).

Within-Family Analyses. In this case, the unit of analysis was a family object and we examined multiple informants' reports about this family object. Within families, we were interested in identifying similarities and differences in object use and behavioral orientation and stories. We also explored commonalities in meanings as described by two or more generations of each family unit. In our findings, we report on each of these issues.

Across-Informant Analyses. Across informants, we were interested in whether we could identify possessions that people hoped their kin would keep or had kept for multiple generations and characteristics of these objects. Considerable diversity in possessions informants desired to keep is noteworthy. We also investigated the process of keeping and identified the kinds of people charged with keeping objects from generation to generation.

FINDINGS

Table 1 summarizes compelling findings and provides examples complementing those in the text. These findings enable us to affirm the presence of inalienable objects in North American middle-class families while at the same time observing distinctions in the character of inalienable wealth in this context. The following presentation amplifies points summarized in table 1 and elaborates how generations of a family create and maintain inalienable wealth.

Consumers Desire Inalienable Wealth and Commit to Preserve It

Many of our informants seek to preserve group identity by collecting and making tangible an ancestral past. At contrast with prior research, we observe informants' longing for traces of an ancestral past in addition to their commitment to preserve objects that speak to a group's identity. For example, during an interview with her son Sam, Sheila, age 50, describes her longing for objects that would link her to her ancestors. She observes: "I guess I'm silly but I am sentimental. I wish I had things from my grandparents,

particularly things I could wear like jewelry pieces or rings, etc. That would mean a lot to me."

Born to Depression era parents who themselves were born to first generation immigrants, Sheila is typical of many of our informants from this generation. She has few material traces of her ancestors, but she longs to create them for her future lineage. Sheila has only one thing that she would consider an heirloom. This is a picture of her father with his family when he was about eight years old. Importantly, the object offers evidence of her association with a family that preceded her father, and it reminds her of her father. She rescued it from one of her mother's drawers and now displays it prominently in her living room. In our first interview with this family, Ellen, Sheila's mother, age 74, thinks it looks horrible. She mentions the object without any particular fondness, nonetheless observing how its symbolic-relational worth (not value) has increased: "Well, I don't know about value, but lately this picture, everyone wants. Olympia (Sheila's aunt) asked me about it, and now Holly (Sheila's sister) is mad because they saw it in Sheila's house, and she wants it. Holly wants me to take it away from Sheila and give it to her (laughing). I'm not gonna do that." This desire for tokens of family continuity is widespread in our data, as is evidence of competition for their guardianship. Sheila warns Sam (her only child) that he should keep this picture and pass it forward to his children and cautions "don't let your Aunt Holly get it!" In this way, we see some of the familial competition for these cherished possessions and some of the hierarchy the receipt of these items seems to carve out within families.

Many of our informants describe an object, observing that they should preserve it because it is the only object passed down from previous generations. It is their only claim to an ancestral past. Thus, Margery, age 68, the second youngest of 10 children, observes of her only heirloom: "It is very special. I don't have anything else since there were nine children in the family; this is the only heirloom that I could get."

Claire's mother, age 49, and her maternal grandmother, age 78, both have several treasured heirlooms, and they hope to pass them forward to their descendents. Like McCracken's (1988) informant, Claire's grandmother, Frances, keeps these family objects as a sacred trust. She explains (note the mythological gloss on attitudes and events in "those days"): "Because my family, over all those years, had objects they treasured for so many years. And years ago, in those days, whatever they got they treasured. That's what I am doing. When I moved, I made sure those things were not broken when I moved, that they were packed by packers. Thank God they were not broken. . . . It's like I inherited these things and I want to keep them and want my children and grandchildren to pass them on to theirs and then pass them on to theirs."

Claire's mother, Maria, agrees with the importance of keeping family heirlooms in the family as repositories of "family history," and she admonishes her daughter, Claire: "I mean you don't have to wear anything I give you, but

TABLE 1

INALIENABLE WEALTH: FINDINGS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Findings	Illustrations
1. <i>Middle-class American consumers desire inalienable wealth and commit to preserve it.</i> Inalienable wealth brings into the present the history, achievements, and titles of their ancestors.	1. Della (age 93): "The Bible, I always remember it being in the family. My grandparents, and then my mother was the oldest daughter so she got, and then I got it, and I will pass it to my oldest daughter. So it's at least four generations right now. . . . Because that Bible is so old, and it has all of the births and deaths and marriages. So it is used as a legal register."
2. <i>Inalienable family objects affirm a social order and reality.</i> Family heirlooms speak to and for a group's social identity and affirm differences between groups.	2. Linnea (age 45): "That [referring to a 102-yr.-old watch that still "runs perfectly to the second"] was really a masterpiece kind of thing, and I know when I see my mother wear it that she is connecting with her own family. . . . I think it was not just a family heirloom as much as it was a symbol of the kind of people they were. They were precise. . . . They valued things; they hung onto things. . . . It probably was one of the few symbols of any kind of maybe wealth that they might have had.
3. <i>Consumers create and affirm across generations the legitimacy of inalienable wealth.</i> Consumers use inalienable objects as signs of imagined values. Storytelling, ritual use, display, and maintenance create and affirm legitimacy.	3a. Jeffrey (age 24): "It just gives a sense of history and continuity. . . . It's the earliest thing that I have that I know belonged to a family member. So just because of that it's important to me." 3b. Samantha (age 56): "The stories have been passed on to my daughter. I have told her some of the stories. My mother told her some of the stories. . . . Being from a small family with only one child, it is pretty easy to communicate that sort of information." (Note: Samantha's daughter relates remarkably similar stories.)
4. <i>Middle-class Americans mythologize the origins of heirlooms.</i>	4. Sandra (age 67): "These are my grandfather's opera glasses. He was a great opera enthusiast; in fact all of his 10 children were named after opera singers. He bought them in Italy. They were made in Italy. You can tell that he used them. Look at that old case. I have no idea how old they are. . . . 125 [years], I have no idea."
a. Objects are generally not very old; human origins have not disappeared.	4a. Priscilla (age 61) talks about her grandmother's near mythical "god-like" stories of her grandfather whom she never met and a "supposedly perfect diamond" engagement ring passed to Priscilla, concluding, "But you know these are her memories, and the memory of this ring, this ring that she passed on was almost sacred and I thought I have to pass it to someone."
b. Active strategic attempts to move objects from alienable to inalienable are much in evidence consistent with the elective kinship meanings characteristic of late modernity.	4b. Interviewer: "What do you think is the reason that you were chosen to receive these objects over someone else?" Shirley (age 53): "Umm, . . . probably because she knew that I would take care of it and then again pass it along to my children."
5. <i>Individuals act as guardians of heirlooms for future generations.</i>	5. Sam: "What does ownership of this mean to you?" Ellen (age 74): "Well, it's not really mine. I only have one, but I have a silver dollar, too. I guess it's worth some money now. Your Grandpa never wanted to give it to George cause he was afraid George would spend it or turn it in. He said for me to save it for George when he gets older. So we just kept it in the box. Papa said George can have it when he dies."
a. Successful reproduction may be a qualification for selection as a caretaker. Heirs are those current guardians judged willing and able to assume care-taking responsibilities.	5a. Susan (age 48): "I probably will give my mother's ring and my ring to Jackie because then I know she'll give it to Kaitlyn for sure. I guess just keep it in the family." Susan explains that she will give the ring to Jackie "because she has a daughter already that will get it when she dies."
b. The role is adapted to the elective nature of contemporary family forms. Certain other responsibilities may accompany caretaker role.	5b. Marcus (age 79): "I guess I bought it in the late 1940s just before we had kids. Probably my first born, Sharon, will get it. . . . She has been holding the Thanksgiving dinners at her house for the past 6 or 7 years and now it is becoming a tradition of sorts."
6. <i>Guardians are responsible for ensuring that heirlooms stay within the family.</i>	6. Josie (age 83): "The items are not to be sold. I have a will specifying that all items are to stay in the family. . . . I want John to have the sword. . . . I hope he takes care of it and keeps it so he will be able to say that his great-grandfather was able to carry this sword in the Civil War and be proud to say so."
a. Family heirlooms provide evidence of krapthony and the responsibility to share the benefits of inalienable wealth with the kinship group.	6a. Clara (age 29): "And that's the other thing, I think it's my duty to raise her to value not only the things of the present but the things of the past. And if I, if I teach her right, I won't have to worry about where those items go."
b. Guardians use cherished inherited objects to convey values and meanings of significance to their kin.	6b. Jan (age 31): "When we have family gatherings at my house, I would love to bring out the quilt to show the family and all sit around and talk about our memories. I feel that would be a very special time to share the quilt."
7. <i>The fragility of inalienable possessions is evident, along with substantial anxiety about insuring inalienability.</i>	

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Findings	Illustrations
<p>a. Caretaking is mainly constructed between generations of a small kinship group, sometimes reduced to same gender lineages.</p> <p>b. Inalienable wealth may be distributed among future caretakers, competed for, or withheld. These behaviors encode within family status distinctions.</p>	<p>7a. Denise (age 46, an oldest daughter): "What my mother told me is that she thought it was extremely special because she didn't have anything herself from her grandmother. And her grandmother had never given anything to her, so she was very pleased to think that she was able to give this to me and that I was going to have something from my great-grandmother."</p> <p>7b. Brad (age 23): "I would like to receive the shotgun that has been passed down through my father's family tree, but unfortunately, I already know that object goes to his oldest son, which is not myself."</p>

at least keep it in a safe place for future generations to see." Claire, Maria, and Frances (quoted below) all desire to treasure and preserve heirlooms, even if the particular objects hold little personal appeal. Maria describes a brooch she received from her aunt "that is not really my taste in jewelry. . . . I never really wore it," that nevertheless is kept in a safety deposit box. She reports: "It is a part of family history. I'll never give it away and for now it's safe where it won't be lost." (Illustration 1 in table 1 provides an additional example.)

Admittedly, a few informants had no objects they felt should be kept. Despite diligent probing, one father, age 56, and son, age 25, maintained that all possessions are alienable. The father planned to divide property and money equally among his sons, and he had no feeling for objects received from past generations except insofar as they had monetary value. His son mirrored his father's perception that any object is available at the right "market" price. Discussing coins inherited from his grandfather, the son notes the absence of an affective tie to his grandfather but also the absence of any sentiments about family history. Although this case was unusual, family members sometimes disagree about objects' alienable/inalienable status.

Inalienable Family Objects Affirm a Social Order and Reality

Some informants contend that family heirlooms "hold" and "remind" members' of their social identity (see illustration 2 in table 1). Edith, age 65, clearly opines that inalienable wealth provides identity and links current generations to a stream of ancestors that make up their social distinction. She counsels the authors: "Treasure any heirlooms that your family may give to you as they hold great memories and associations with your family and its members. . . . The events that transpire throughout your life and objects that you acquire are what make up your life."

Inherited objects, cherished by recipients because their original owners' spirit contaminates them, are unlikely to become inalienable unless they support a desired group identity. The stories told about these cherished possessions reflect positively on the owning families and attest to their distinction. Stories also socialize younger family members to values respected by the family. Three dyads within a family (the oldest daughter and mother, the younger daughter

and mother, and the son and mother) interviewed by the authors illustrate this negative outcome when stories are purposively not told. A failure of transmission occurs despite evident contamination and the families' valuing of inalienable wealth. Matilda, the mother, age 76, told a story of a cherished seascape painting that she and her husband spontaneously purchased long ago with the money they saved for a new dryer. She described it as "one of the most foolish things we did," adding "we don't usually do things frivolous like that. We are very conservative." They both fell in love with it because it recalled for them youthful freedom and whimsicality lost, as today "they don't even allow you to have fires [on the beach]." Both daughters and Matilda's son were surprised to learn their mother cherished the painting, and none had heard Matilda's vivid origin story. Matilda has shared stories of other cherished objects with her children (who are now in their forties and fifties) repeatedly over the years, so the lack of narrative intervention seems conscious rather than an oversight. Here we see an interesting disjuncture between a cherished object that has deep indexical meanings and a potentially inalienable object that has the capacity to speak for the family's identity. The oral text bundled with the cherished painting contrasts with family values and household tradition. Matilda sees her family as conservative, not frivolous. She does not want the painting to serve as a family emblem. Member checks with each grown child we interviewed suggested that they felt that this was a logical explanation for why their mother had not discussed her feelings about this painting.

Across Generations Consumers Create and Affirm the Legitimacy of Inalienable Wealth

Godelier (1999) and Weiner (1992) note that, to survive as inalienable possessions, objects must affirm a social order and reality viewed as legitimate and shared from generation to generation. However, the totemic objects they study seem to have incontrovertible legitimacy within membership groups, thought to have survived since the tribal groups' origins. Data, especially that reported below, access specific ways generations of middle-class American families create and affirm the legitimacy of inalienable wealth. Consumers such as Sheila, Claire, Maria, Frances, and Ernie (quoted below) possess objects they believe represent family history, objects that can speak to and for the identity of the

group—emblems of kinship (illustration 3a in table 1 provides another example). At the same time, many informants acknowledge that, in “other families,” objects that should be kept are not kept but become alienable—are sold in estate or garage sales or given away to nonprofit organizations (Price et al. 2000). Although they frame their discussion in terms of “other families,” guardians fear that the market will overpower the inalienable status of their own families’ treasured possessions.

In this section, we describe storytelling and ritual use, display, and maintenance as central to creating and maintaining inalienable wealth’s legitimacy. Storytelling and ritual use convey objects’ sacred status and power and affirm a social order ideally reproduced by each new generation.

Storytelling. As noted in other research on inalienable wealth, sacred objects encompass both the visible, material component and the immaterial elements (stories of origin, secret chants, spells, and names; Godelier 1999; Weiner 1992). Storytelling (especially stories of origin) emerge in our data as a strategic means for establishing and maintaining inalienability. Oral texts are bundled with objects, and together they impart legitimating force; illustration 3b in table 1 provides an example.)

Informants who strategize to create inalienable family possessions from their cherished objects recognize the importance of storytelling. One example surrounds a ring that Mrs. Thompson, age 72, wants to become inalienable. The ring is a gift from Mrs. Thompson’s late husband, Jeff, and she tells the interviewer, who is not a family member, a detailed, emotional, and romantic story of how love perseveres through war and across distance. She plans to pass this ring to her only daughter, Patricia, age 45, with whom she has a close relationship, noting: “She has always seen it on me. The ring will always remind her of me after I am gone. To me that is important.” Mrs. Thompson recognizes the legitimating potential of her own contamination of the ring, and the amalgamated stories and meanings that her daughter, Patricia, will bundle with the ring. As others have noted, telling the story of the object helps Mrs. Thompson relive an important moment in her own history that coincides with a historical moment in time (the end of World War II), and it brings into the present a departed loved one (Price et al. 2000). However, she tells the story for strategic reasons as well, and it is here that we learn something about the origins of inalienable wealth. She observes, with regard to her daughter, “I told her the story a bunch of times, and she always got excited to hear about it and was very interested with details.” This illustrates the rehearsal of stories so critical in assuring the object endorses a social order and reality affirmed from generation to generation. Mrs. Thompson reveals her aim: “I want the ring to start becoming a family heirloom, and to be passed on to generations. When it’s passed down, I want my daughter to tell her daughter, Amanda, the story behind it.” Amanda, age 22, is targeted as the next recipient because Mrs. Thompson and Amanda’s older sister “have our differences.” Still, Amanda and Amanda’s older sister Emily, age 28, reveal that their grand-

mother on their father’s side of the family has targeted Emily to receive certain prize possessions. From Amanda, we learn several things. Unprompted, she reveals her desire to receive the ring and pass it forward to her children. A further probe discloses the following:

My guess would be that I’d pass down the ring to my oldest daughter, assuming I’ll get it from my mom. If I have only boys, I’ll probably give it to my oldest son’s wife. I guess I’ll write it in the will, for security, you know, but would give it either on a special occasion or when I’ll be real old. I’ll let them know that my grandma and grandpa were in love and that he went to war, and she waited for him, and will ask them to pass it down to the next generation. Hopefully, it . . . will become a family heirloom in the future.

Amanda’s words echo the hopes, stories, and ritual transfer effected by her grandmother, Mrs. Thompson, who plans to pass the ring to her daughter, Patricia, on Patricia’s fiftieth birthday. Amanda articulates the value of passing the stories forward to the next generation in order to insure inalienability. Although the ring contains positive contamination from her grandmother’s use and may well come to be positively contaminated from her mother’s repeated use as well, Amanda plans to tell the story of the ring’s origin to her children, thus reinforcing the legitimating value of the story and framing the ring’s inalienable qualities.

Beth, age 42, describes with delight and pride how her 13-yr.-old son and 15-yr.-old daughter know “exactly” the story (note the gloss) behind a gold watch she received from her grandparents, who passed it forward from her great-aunt. Her children’s knowledge and reenactment of stories surrounding this object maintains a social order. Beth says, “In our house things are very important. I mean, there are pieces Mother has given, she’s given us that we really cherish.” Author interviews with Beth, her mother Margie, her brother Fred, and her sister-in-law Carmen confirm that this family marks status and achievements with gifts of precious objects that they should keep. To illustrate, Beth proudly tells stories of a sterling silver basket that belonged to her mother and before that to her grandmother. Her “brother would love to have it,” but it was entrusted to her instead. For Beth and her family, these objects “signify the family’s elite social status.” In this family, children compete to receive “important things” like the silver basket. This case illustrates the proposition (hinted at in Sheila and Mrs. Thompson’s families) that over time inalienable wealth can symbolize status distinctions within groups (Godelier 1999; Weiner 1992). Further, it shows that, with narrative intervention to supplant fading indexical value, cherished keepsakes are more likely to become inalienable. We encountered instances when families did not tell objects’ stories, as in the seascape painting described earlier. In such cases, younger family members either did not know of or lacked feelings for the possession.

Ritual Possession Use, Display, and Maintenance. Oral texts and especially stories of origin that accompany

inalienable objects are central to their distinctive value. Yet, as Weiner (1992) insists, guardians must preserve and pass forward the objects along with the rituals that give these possessions authoritative meaning (Arnould and Price 2000). Our informants provide numerous illustrations of how, as objects move from alienable to inalienable, they alter their display and usage to reflect their now inalienable status. Josie, age 83, describes a sword that belonged to her grandfather, a Civil War veteran. She alleged he carried it at the legendary battle of Vicksburg. She inherited it as a toddler, because she was “his namesake and his favorite grandchild,” and she plans to pass it on to her grandson. Although Josie has heard stories about the sword, the sword lacks corporal indexical associations with her grandfather (no memories of him associated with the sword). Nevertheless, she sees it as a proud, distinct family possession that future generations must keep. She preserves the sword and hides it when she leaves town. Her son John also noted Josie’s ritual care of the sword in his interview, thus endorsing the domestic social order the sword legitimates.

For his part, Josie’s son John, age 48, has inherited his great-great-grandfather’s ring, brought back from California during the Gold Rush. John emulates his mother’s valuing of history and his father’s pattern of nonuse, and he keeps the ring locked in a safe. “I think my grandfather may have worn the ring, but my father did not, nor would I. The ring is pure gold and very soft.” From this altered usage we might infer that, for John’s grandfather, the ring was a “keepsake” and was in the process of becoming what it now represents for John and his father—inalienable wealth. John describes it as “a link to the past”; it also affirms the ideal of pursuing dreams through adversity, also embedded in Josie’s stories of her grandfather’s Civil War service. John’s story of the ring includes “family history,” a mythical time, “the Gold Rush, along with the Wild West and Indians,” and legendary characters. But the conclusion to the story evokes a moral theme for this family: “So, every time I look at the ring I appreciate it more, because I know what he had to go through, walking all the way to California to pursue a dream.”

Consumers Mythologize the Origins of Heirlooms

As illustrated in the previous section, active strategic attempts to move objects from alienable to inalienable are prominent among our informants (also see illustration 4b in table 1). This is a departure from previous research where this passage is not evident. Previous research depicts inalienable wealth as detached in space and/or time in such a way that the human origins of the objects fade and then disappear (Godelier 1999). Our informants, like Sheila and Margery, often speak of the short time horizons over which objects have become “things to be kept.” Informants though, still try to convey to interviewers the tradition and importance of objects that have been in the family for even a few generations. Over the threshold to his kitchen, Ernie, who is in his early seventies, displays “like my father did” the coat of arms that his grandfather made. He explains that “it has passed

on to the eldest son of each succeeding generation” and “the tradition has remained strong.” Ernie describes to his grandson how special this possession is, observing that “[my grandfather] vowed to pass a treasure from his homeland of Italy to his new family he will make in America.” This coat of arms “carries the strength of a family . . . the tradition of a family successful in Italy as well as America.” Ernie’s description belies the fact that his grandfather made this object, rather than it passing down through generations of “eldest sons.” Ernie’s eldest son also speaks of this coat of arms as a family emblem tied to a tradition he plans to continue. (See illustrations 4 and 4a in table 1 for additional examples.)

Consumers Act as Guardians of Inalienable Possessions

The guardian role shapes the difference between a “keepsake,” sacralized through positive contamination with a previous owner (Belk et al. 1989; Grayson and Shulman 2000), and an inalienable possession, intended to preserve a point of difference and distinction for the kinship group (Weiner 1992). The guardian or curatorial role helps to allay the doubts that Belk et al. (1989) and McCracken (1988) raise about the future of heirlooms and the question Finch and Mason (2000) pose regarding how “keepsakes” or heirlooms can be kept in the family in the absence of direct affective ties to their original owners.

Many informants recognize the guardian role and its elective quality (see 5a and 5b in table 1 for additional illustrations). For example, Linnea, age 45, recognizes the role of “family recorder”: “I often think that we tend to have one family member who’s maybe a little bit more invested in family things. Sort of like a family recorder. I think I’m that for my family. And I think it’s likely to be my oldest [a daughter].”

Godelier (1999) and Weiner (1992) describe the interdependence of men and women in preserving gendered inalienable wealth. In our data, objects sometimes cross gender lines. When they do, normally cross-gender guardians hold items in trust until a same-gender caretaker qualifies for guardianship. Examples of females keeping objects inherited from males for future male guardians occur in our data. Our data also include examples of women entrusted to hold inalienable male objects for future qualified male caretakers (see illustration 5 in table 1). We find few instances of men entrusted to keep objects for women. For objects that are not clearly female or male, there are opportunities for the object to pass forward through cross-gender lines.

Guardians Are Responsible for Ensuring That Heirlooms Stay within the Family

As is true in indigenous societies, informants take guardianship of inalienable possessions seriously. As objects move from alienable to inalienable status, kratophony is evident. Caretakers are likely to encase objects in protected environments, subject them to ritual use, and limit who han-

dles them to caretakers and initiates into the caretaker role. Maria, age 49, explicitly notes in an interview with her daughter, Claire, that as she came to understand the significance of an object to the family, her own use of that object changed:

Your grandmother gave me the bracelet her mother gave her when she was born. . . . I always loved it and Mama . . . gave it to me at my forty-sixth birthday party. I cried because it meant a lot to me. I always wanted it. . . . She also told me to cherish it and give it to you when the time was right. . . . It's a dress-up bracelet, so I only wear it on special occasions. It's funny because when I was younger, when I would wear it when I was little, I would have worn it every day all day. Now I see the importance in the bracelet and like your grandmother said, I will cherish it.

Similarly, Claire's grandmother Frances, age 78, treasures crystal she inherited from her Aunt M. She, too, describes a narrowing of storage, use, and access of inherited objects, converting from alienable to inalienable, and she gives voice to kratophony. As caretaker of the family's inalienable wealth, she is responsible for ensuring that the sacred objects pass forward with the stories of origin and rituals of use and preservation. This insures their continued inalienability.

Edith, age 65, has instilled in her children a responsibility for preserving family objects and communicating their power and meaning to future generations. Her son Stanley, age 28, is acting to preserve and pass on the watch he inherited from his grandfather. He remarks, "Starting now, even before the children, I would like to think about the objects that I would consider leaving to my children and the reasons why." Stanley's oldest brother, age 49, is the curator of the family's engraved drinking glasses and his older sister, age 47, is the designated caretaker of an extensive teacup collection. Many other informants acknowledge obligations and responsibilities to keep objects inalienable, teach others their stories, and socialize future caretakers (see illustrations 6 and 6a in table 1 for additional examples).

Guardianship may come with other ritual responsibilities. Recall that guardian(s) should share sacred powers and other benefits of inalienable wealth among the group—"giving while keeping" as Weiner (1992) put it. Several instances in our data depict ritual obligations to the greater family unit accompanying guardianship of inalienable wealth. Commonly, these ritual obligations have to do with "keeping the family history," "keeping the family together," or a combination of these two themes. For example, a few informants served as guardians for family Bibles, noting the role of these Bibles in keeping the history of their families but also often observing that they needed to update the Bibles with new births and deaths before passing them forward to the next caretaker (see illustration 6b in table 1 for another example).

Melinda, age 43, is caretaker of a marble-topped table she inherited from her grandmother, who, tellingly, was "al-

ways the one that pulled us together as a family." This table contains the playing cards with which, as children, she and her cousins often used to play "Spite and Malice." When Melinda inherited the table, she discovered she was expected to take on their grandmother's kin-keeping role. Melinda observes that this is a difficult job because her grandmother's three sons do not get along well. Still, her cousin now looks to her as the matriarch of the family. Melinda concludes: "But, it was because of Grandmother that we all congregated together. To really be with her you know, because she was just so special. So, I think that was kind of interesting that he looked to me that I was going to, you know, be able. And, that's a lot of responsibility." Symbolically, guardianship charges Melinda with using the power imbued in the table to keep the family together. Melinda's kin believe she should use the table to benefit the whole family.

Other informants, who serve as caretakers for family china, report feeling a responsibility to host family gatherings, thereby maintaining these inalienable objects' iconic role in symbolizing family togetherness. Toni, age 29, her two sisters, and her mother each describe several sacred, inalienable objects, sharing stories of origin and plans for passing them forward. Toni then describes her great-aunt on her father's side saying, "she's become the bearer of the family treasures," but Toni goes on to link this to the survival of the family itself. "We have a very close family. My aunt is very interested in keeping these things. She is like the heart of the family. She has kept all of the memory alive through her." Notice that Toni's description melds having a close family and being the heart of the family with keeping these inalienable objects.

Inalienable Wealth Is Fragile

Informants who espouse the view that objects should be kept also offer stories of objects that should have been but were not kept. The fear of loss, hovering in stories of inalienable objects, resonates with stories of objects intended for inalienability that instead were confiscated by Cuban immigration officials; stolen out of jewelry boxes; broken in moving, ritual use, or display; or severed from future family by broken family ties.

One reason for the fragility of inalienable wealth is kratophony. People desire guardianship; hence, the stories of competition for inalienable wealth previously described by Sheila, Beth, and others (Cours et al. 1999). (See also illustration 7b in table 1.) However, inalienable wealth is also an obligation and a burden. Shelly, age 40, who is a widow and already the oldest living member of her family, describes the burdensome nature of inalienable wealth: "I have lots of inherited items. . . . And I guess that I value everything. In fact, I sometimes feel that my house is a shrine to these different people because these different possessions . . . belonged to someone else and I feel obligated to hold on to everything! For example, the dining room set is something that I truly dislike. . . . I'll leave them to James, who like myself will be burdened with tons of things that he will be compelled to keep." James, age 22, is her only heir. James

does not express an interest in inheriting these objects that so burden his mother. Perhaps with time, he will change his mind, but perhaps not. Thus, these possessions may return to the status of alienable after only a short tenure as inalienable wealth. Not everyone wants the responsibilities that come with guardianship.

Shelly and her heir, James, also evoke another reason for inalienable wealth's fragility. Narrowly circumscribed family units (sometimes reduced to same-gender lineages or single heirs) act as guardians of inalienable wealth. Whether an object successfully transitions from one generational guardian to another may turn on a single potential caretaker. (See illustration 7a in table 1 for another example.) This contrasts with relatively large cohorts of clan and/or kin who prioritize keeping inalienable wealth in indigenous societies. Moreover, forces that disperse and disrupt families rupture storytelling, ritual use, and training of future guardians, processes central to retaining inalienable wealth. For example, Ella, age 78, whose mother died when she was a little girl, retains only a couple of keepsakes from her. One of those objects, a Chinese bowl, is now on display in her daughter's home and is treasured by that daughter as a trace of an ancestral past. Ella explains: "When my mother died, things just kind of got away. . . . We went to live with my aunt and uncle, the ones that brought me up afterward. [My father] rented the house furnished and things got broken. . . . [He] remarried and the things he had went to his wife and her family." Divorce also affects the dispersal of inalienable wealth. In some cases, divorces lead children to want nothing to do with the inalienable wealth of the severed kin, but not always. In other cases, divorce subtly shapes transmission and status distinctions or creates competition between separate families of a common ancestor. Aggie, age 75, whose father left her mother when she was 4 yr. old received one possession, a mantle clock, passed to her by the executor for her father's estate at his initiative "because you have nothing of your dad's." Aggie went on to talk about how one of her step-brothers would like it, but she has no intention of giving it up.

DISCUSSION

Previous anthropological theory identifies a category of objects qualitatively distinct from both commodities and gifts but analyzed primarily in economic contexts deeply dissimilar from our marketing-driven one. But recent research in economic psychology also identifies objects whose fungibility respondents resist (McGraw et al. 2003). The idea that some possessions fall outside of the domain of exchange is troubling to anthropological and economic theory. Our research answers the question of whether and how individual keepsakes, gifted or bequeathed by a familiar older generation, become the inalienable wealth of a kinship group—objects that resist fungibility to be kept in the family. The findings discussed above and additional examples provided in table 1 illustrate that middle-class North American families behave in ways conducive to the creation of inal-

ienable wealth and identify items that conform to definitions of the construct grounded in anthropological examples.

We contribute to existing research on irreplaceable cherished possessions and keepsakes by identifying a social dimension to heirlooms that transcends individual significance or a sum of individual meanings, adhering instead to inalienable wealth precepts. We also contribute to existing research on inalienable wealth by illustrating the distinct contours of inalienable wealth in middle-class North America.

We asked if inalienable wealth serves as a sign of imagined values to North American consumers, and if so, what kind of sign? Inalienable wealth is not an interpersonal, indexical symbol (Grayson and Shulman 2000) as are keepsakes, but rather, in Pierce's terms, an iconic one. Like a religious icon in which a community of believers feels the saint is immanent, iconic symbols are affectively charged signs that embody meaning. The icon is of a piece with its guardians; it exhibits quintessence (Belk et al. 1989). It was people's confusion between the sign and its meaning that led Pierce to term icons "degenerate signs." The differentiated contemporary meanings of family to kinsfolk are immanent in their inalienable wealth (Grayson 1998; Grayson and Shulman 2000). Extending prior research, we illustrate that, although inalienable possessions lack the corporal indexical associations of irreplaceable individual cherished objects or keepsakes, they retain evidentiary associations that make them irreplaceable. We posit that evidentiary rather than indexical associations may account for the irreplaceable status of certain cherished possessions.

Our data belie the assertions of McCracken (1988) and Belk (1990) that heirlooms are rare across contemporary families and distinctive to the upper social classes or geographically stable middle-class families. Almost none of our middle-class informants denied the existence or value of family heirlooms, and many were proud to have cared for them through migrations. Finally, unlike researchers (Belk 1990; McCracken 1988) who emphasize inherited objects' past associations, our data suggest that inalienable heirlooms are symbolic vehicles that imaginatively extend the group (not the individual) forward in time. The chosen objects, laden with meaning, are preserved for the purpose of representing the family in the future via an eventual line of carefully selected and groomed guardian curators.

Through heirlooms, consumers enlist the achievements of ancestors to move family distinction forward in time. Our informants evoked short time horizons to consider a possession worthy of being passed forward through the lineage. The coat of arms that Ernie's grandfather made is a good example. This stands in contrast to a similar investigation in Denmark that found it takes a greater period for objects to be considered "old." In one case, a 5-ft.-long narwhale horn that reportedly had been in a family for seven generations was about to be discarded (Francois and Curasi 1998). This temporal divergence could be, in part, due to the different social histories of these countries. Future research could provide insight into this conundrum.

Our findings raise a provocative question of whether mid-

middle-class North American families would be worse off without inalienable wealth. Our informants perceive inalienable wealth as beneficial by keeping family units more cohesive, providing family identity, making status distinctions, and representing moral and religious values. Informants act as if an absence of ancestral objects would diminish family standing and decompose members' lives. Despite its emic value, our data do not clearly identify the benefits of the relative presence of inalienable wealth in a family. Despite yearning for inalienable wealth, some cohesive families have accumulated little, if any, inalienable wealth. Other families riven by death, divorce, remarriage, and sibling rivalry still cobble together a sense of family history through inalienable objects. Future research might examine what impacts the constitution of a stock of inalienable wealth has on family identity and continuity.

We can envision the commitment of generations of a family to keep, rather than alienate, marketable objects as market resistance (Kozinets 2002). The threat that future caretakers may falter against the force of market logic is apparent in our data. Nevertheless, in contrast to events such as Burning Man, conceived of as a temporary and local act of emancipatory resistance, families conceive of inalienable wealth as eternal and capable of linking group members across time and space. Future research should further explore Kozinets's (2002, p. 36) assertion that "emancipation, if possible at all, must be conceived of as temporary and local."

The movement of objects from inalienable to alienable status also merits future inquiry. We restricted our sample to families with stable or increasing intergenerational prosperity, and our central focus was on the move from alienable to inalienable status. Exploring specific economic and other pressures to alienate inalienable objects may help us better understand inalienable objects' resistance to market forces. We found little evidence of conscious decisions to move objects from inalienable to alienable status because the group rejected the social order that the objects legitimated. Future focused research might uncover decisions of this type.

Sometimes transfer of inalienable wealth to individuals outside of the family may serve not to make objects alienable but to bring those individuals within the family. In several instances in our data, families entrust a daughter-in-law (outside the blood line) with an inalienable object and represent this as further evidence that she is "just like a daughter." Exploring movements between inalienable and alienable status, and even levels of inalienability (e.g., between kinship group and community or nation), may provide insight into the negotiation and redefinition of family identity and group boundaries.

Our middle-class informants documented their status and distinction as a family through their heirlooms and their stories. However, we did not explore whether family heirlooms in our data served as a source of status outside that particular family group. Today's family heirlooms have little in common with family heirlooms of medieval and early modern families. In some premodern societies, heirlooms functioned very effectively as a symbol of a

lineage's status (Cooper 1970; McCracken 1988). Cherished possessions with patina and signs of age demonstrated the length of time a family had owned these items. Through patina, a family authenticated their status. Signs of aging on the possessions of premodern families allowed these lineages to claim, legitimate, and compete for social status. Our research, however, does not address the question of whether a contemporary community might evaluate its member families differently if they had possessions that could attest to such a rich history. Whether contemporary society devalues families that do not have the ability to demonstrate historical depth through their possessions requires future research.

The research reported in this article has two other limitations that we acknowledge. First, ethnographic interview data do not afford the same kind of generalizability that probability sampling does. By employing the definitional criteria that has been summarized in the table, future survey research could investigate the population distribution of inalienable wealth. Second, our data overrepresent white, middle-class families. How inalienable wealth varies in definition and incidence across different ethnic and social strata is a rich area for future research.

[Dawn Iacobucci served as editor and Rob Kozinets served as associate editor for this article.]

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