

A Theory of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics

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

Phase II. Case Study with Object Donors to
The National September 11 Memorial & Museum

The Museum as Ally

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Introduction

The intent of this research is to define and examine the psychological underpinnings of the intrinsic relationships between people and objects, and from that understanding develop impactful strategies for generating museum exhibition experiences that explicitly promote health and opportunities for healing. Our premise is that exhibition experiences are potent and unique in their ability to foster wellbeing and contribute to psychological healing, and that by identifying and articulating the inherent role that objects play in our everyday health and wellbeing we can design experiences with objects that explicitly foster healthful outcomes. This document introduces the reader to the theory of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics (Cowan 2015), provides a summary of the first phase of research that generated the theory, and presents in full the second and most recent phase of research, a case study involving donors to the September 11th Museum and Memorial. Implications for further applied research conclude the document.

Background and Body of Scholarship

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

This study was prompted by foundational work in the museum and material culture professions particular to the phenomenological and evocative nature of objects, the influence of everyday objects in the lives of people, the nature of object-based meaning making and the defined characteristics that shape those meanings. The body of literature as shaped by the fundamental works of John Dewey, Lois Silverman and George Hein provides us with a framework for studying object relationships within the museum environment and examining the role of the exhibition to foster meaning making where objects hold the power to illustrate, explain, captivate and enable visitors to relate to content in a personally significant manner. The work of Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has provided an essential guiding definition of overarching object characteristics, including power (vitality and energy), self (personal identity and continuum), and society (relationship and hierarchy). Sherry Turkle's work with objects leads us to the evocative nature of objects as silent partners and life companions, repositories for memory and history, and as provocateurs of thought and action. Most recently, Latham and Wood present to us the Object Knowledge Framework, a new way of defining multidimensional people-object relationships in

museum environments. Their study includes looking at interrelationships between work in phenomenology and the ways in which humans on an instinctual level seek to make meaning out of objects, as explored in museum-based research. In their Object Knowledge Framework, Wood and Latham assert four key characteristics of object experiences, including Unity of the Moment; Object Link (objects as repositories); Being Transported (the transpersonal); and Connections Bigger than Self (numinous qualities including reverence, spirituality and connections with higher things).

Additional foundations for our research are found in psychoanalytical and sociological theory in which objects signify human factors such as self and identity, the relationship of individuals to family/society (Rochberg-Halton, 1984, Fowler, 2010), and personal power/primal self (Nguyen, 2011). Of particular interest is the work of Pierre Lemmonier who describes objects as being multidimensional devices of non-verbal communication that perform social intercourse, or communication that is a part of everyday life yet not always consciously recognized. The object converges, or instantaneously activates a coalescence of feelings, circumstances, and domains of experience in the context of its making or use. Lemmonier refers to objects in this respect as “perissological resonators” whose material use triggers emergent, nonverbal statements speak what words cannot and can communicate “unspeakable truths.”

Additionally, two researchers of note provide information on the relationship between therapy and museums, each suggesting that exhibition visitation has a direct healing impact on audiences. The insightful work of Andree Salom (at the Center for Transpersonal Studies in Colombia) infuses his research with many of the themes explored by Csikzentmihalyi, Hein, Silverman, Latham and Wood. Most particularly, Salom defines the numinous characteristics in certain objects, and the emotive quality of exhibition spaces, as kindlers of transpersonal experience in exhibitions, opening up visitors to flow states, spiritual inspiration, self reflection, deepened awareness and mindfulness. In similar fashion, “Muse Therapy” is the term used by Manoru Adachi at the Nagoya University Museum, where he has studied the healing impacts of arts-based museum programming – in conjunction with object-based exhibitions – on primary and secondary school-aged students. He focuses on mental stress in students, and how multiple visitations and multi-sensory interaction with museum specimens indicated “recovery from the problems” (of mental stress).

Altogether, this groundwork has encouraged the first two phases of research leading to the definition of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics, and will continue to underscore the work towards practical museum-based applications.

Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics

Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics refers to the inherent relationships between an object and its characteristics, the dynamic actions between the object and a person, and the resultant psychological impact of those actions. The theory suggests that objects are, on a fundamental level, essential to psychological health, wellbeing and healing. The theory also explains why objects have undeniable and common evocative and phenomenological characteristics inherent to meaning making. Furthermore, the theory illustrates broader sociological concepts of power, self and society.

Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics is defined by five dynamics: Releasing/Unburdening, Giving/Receiving, Composing, Associating, and Making that coalesce around fundamental scholarship in the disciplines of material culture, museum studies, psychology and psychotherapy. In application, the theory suggests that object-based exhibitions can be explicitly designed to enhance the psychological healing capacities of museum visitors and to attend to the everyday psychological health and wellbeing of museum audiences and participants. The individual dynamics are defined as follows:

Releasing/Unburdening

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

Making

The action of generating an original or newly-formed object as a means of experiencing and implementing the fundamental creative process, and in doing so undergoing progressive stages of psychological growth and healing.

Associating

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

Giving/Receiving

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

Composing

The action of bringing together and juxtaposing objects with the intent of forming and expressing concepts or ideas so as to coalesce, examine and convey meanings that cannot otherwise be fully or entirely explained or expressed.

Phase I Field Research Summary

Conducted June – July 2015, Cowan

This first phase of research examined potential areas of confluence between object interpretation and meaning-making in museum practice with objects as used in therapeutic practice. Grounded in the body of scholarship defining the phenomenological and evocative nature of objects, their influence in the lives of people, and the characteristics that shape those meanings, the purpose of the research was to explore the reason for those meanings, their fundamental psychological underpinnings. Converging the disciplines of museum and object studies, psychology and psychotherapy, the study followed the premise that people have an innate and necessary relationship with objects I refer to as primal dialogue, that is essential to personal meaning making and to an individual's psychological health. To explore this premise, object-based therapy was determined to be an appropriate and unique arena for study, leading to primary research in the use of objects at an adolescent therapeutic wilderness program (Trails Carolina), and with a psychologist and psychotherapist expert in the making of objects as a means of self-discovery and actualization (Professor Ross Laird). The therapeutic work with objects at each venue correlates with research in the roles and interpretation of objects in museum exhibitions, as well as objects in relation to sociocultural identification, self-identification, power, and humanity. The study's focus was placed on self-made objects and those found in nature, as opposed to branded and commercially mass-produced objects. At Trails Carolina (Lake Toxaway, North Carolina), interviews were conducted with the facility's Clinical Director, Director of Students and Field Manager. Additionally, two days were spent in the field with a group of adolescents engaged in the therapeutic process where observations were made of object-based individual and group therapy sessions, as well as wilderness lifestyle practices. At the Museum of Cultural Anthropology (Vancouver, British Columbia) Professor Laird was interviewed about his approach to creativity-based therapeutic practice and his expertise regarding the psychological impact of objects. The primary research findings resulted in a new theory of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics that illustrates how objects are inherent to an individual's wellbeing and psychological health. The theory's five primary dynamics include Making, Associating, Releasing/Unburdening, Composing, and Giving/Receiving.

Phase II Case Study Executive Summary

Conducted June 2016, Cowan, Laird, McKeown

Overview

The intent of the second phase of research was to seek evidence for, and to further define, the theory of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics by way of concrete examples involving a museum environment. In coordination with the National September 11 Memorial & Museum (New York, NY), a case study was conducted with object donors to the institution's collections. Performing the case study were Brenda Cowan, Associate Professor of Exhibition Design, School of Graduate Studies at SUNY/FIT, Professor Ross Laird, PhD, Interdisciplinary Creative Process, MA, Counseling Psychology, and Jason McKeown MS, LMFT, CPE, DCC, Director of Clinical and Family Services Trails Carolina.

The National September 11 Memorial & Museum was selected because of its unique collections-donor relationship that suggested explicit demonstrations of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics. Eleven in-depth interviews were conducted between June 8th and June 11th, 2016. On behalf of the research team the institution sent out a voluntary call via mail to a prospective interview population. For the purposes of this study, the subjects were identified solely according to their relationship to the event and to the object(s) they donated. Participants included five widows, three survivors (including one who also lost a husband and one who lost a cousin), one mother who lost a son, one first responder, and one on-location journalist. The case study explored the psychotherapeutic benefits of the participation of the object donors in the institution's acquisitions, the personal identification of the donors with their donated objects, and the psychological experience of the donors through the process of donation.

The interviewing methodology utilized a heuristic approach focused on generating qualitative data. This narrative-based approach invited participants to explore and express the idea of donation, the event itself, the donated object(s) and their meanings, and what if any, healing/meaning was found in the object experience for the interviewees. The researchers sought to identify patterns of intent, experience, and emotional outcomes in both the short and long-term. Some of the object donations were made immediately following the event, whereas others were made sometime in the ensuing years. The most recent donation was four months ago. In some cases, subjects were approached by The National September 11 Memorial & Museum and asked to consider donating, while others made the initial contact. In every case, subjects gave objects willingly and some are considering donating additional items at some point in the future.

Overarching Findings

The data collected reinforced commonly held understandings of the meaningfulness of objects in everyday life, the potency of objects within museum environments, the value of participation, co-creation and open-content generation in exhibitions, and identified particular modes of design that are psychologically and interpretively impactful. Multiple subjects referred to their objects as "witnesses" to the event and to their own experience, and as the means by which the story of the event and their roles within it will be told. Most subjects referred to the need for the objects

to keep the memory of their loved one alive, and/or the need for the objects to provide an accurate accounting of the details of what occurred. One subject clearly explained that the objects she donated carry a great deal of weight (responsibility), which can be reasonably said for all of the subjects interviewed. In many instances, subjects referred to The National September 11 Memorial & Museum as a place where their objects will be kept safe. The objects will be protected, and in that regard the institution is an ally. One subject specifically referred to The National September 11 Memorial & Museum as a “therapeutic ally.” In the profession’s current discourse regarding the role of participation and co-creation in museum content generation as well as the responsibility of museums to their constituencies, the importance of that message cannot be overstated.

Our review of the data collected from the eleven interviews show multiple examples of four of the five object dynamics in play: Associating, Releasing/Unburdening, Composing, and Giving/Receiving. Anecdotes from the subjects regarding the meanings of the objects, their relationships with the objects, their decisions and actions of donating, and the impacts of the experiences provide supportive illustrations of those four dynamics as well as further information regarding the healthful and healing impacts of the donation process. Although the researchers had not anticipated Composing or Making appearing within the data, evidence of Composing emerged in substantive and qualifying ways, and Making was indicated (although to a much lesser degree). The role of place emerged in a few instances, and in the next steps of the study we will consider place for potential inclusion as an object dynamic.

Throughout the interviews, subjects provided information that firmly represented established object characteristics and experiences including: objects as repositories of experience, bearing witness, perrisological resonators, life companions, calls to action, self identity, life continuum, and primal power. Specific illustrations of the object dynamics also emerged throughout all eleven interviews in various ways. Those examples are identified in the Collected Data section of this report, organized by interview question with substantiating quotes from the subjects.

Research Activities

Subject Recruitment and Protection

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

Methodology

The researchers interviewed eleven participants over the course of four days at the office of Associate Professor Brenda Cowan on the campus of SUNY/FIT. The interviews utilized the same script instrument (see Appendix B) and the duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes in length. The differences in interview duration were due to the personal manner in which individual participants answered each question and the amount of information they were willing or able to share. For the interviews, each participant was seated with all three researchers, the interview questions were asked by Associate Professor Cowan, and all three researchers scribed participants' responses. Follow up requests for further clarification or additional examples were asked for as needed.

Collected Data

The following information is organized per interview question and includes data collected from all eleven interviews. The most common responses to each question, across all eleven participants, is recorded with defining and qualifying quotes and/or anecdotes. Additionally, data that is unique or uncommon yet insightful is also presented with defining and qualifying information. Information given that specifically illustrated an object dynamic are identified with its corresponding dynamic.

Interview Questions

Why did you choose to donate an object to the Memorial?

Of the eleven subjects, nine specifically stated that the reason they chose to donate to The National September 11 Memorial & Museum involved the need for remembrance and legacy. These included objects that had belonged to victims and had been donated by a family member, as well as personal objects that were donated by survivors. Two subjects were less clear about why they donated. The words “reminder,” “remembrance,” “remembered” and “legacy” were commonly used when expressing the desire for others to know about the event:

“(The object is) a reminder to the world of what happened.”

“A remembrance for generations to come.”

“(It will) leave a legacy so other people can have that vigilance.”

“People should not forget.”

It was important for the object donors to believe that those who visit The National September 11 Memorial & Museum will remember the specific individuals who were affected. It was of critical importance for the subjects to feel that the people who owned the objects are remembered and/or known in as personal a manner as possible:

“I wanted to make him a person, not a number.”

“I need them [the objects] to bear witness for my husband. To show that he was somebody who lived.”

“I want [visitors] to share my ordeal.”

The role of the museum as a place of safekeeping and of testament arose:

“I wanted the object to be in an important place.”

“[The objects] say it actually happened. More than the photos. The photos are second generation.”

“I wanted it to be in an important place.”

“I need to preserve his story.”

“I wanted to contribute to history.”

One subject spoke about donating because she believes the National September 11 Memorial & Museum is “helping people to be touched.”

Why did you select the object that you did?

Nine of the eleven interviewees were able to identify the reasons they selected the objects they did; two could not remember and suggested there wasn't a particular reason. The word "story" came up most often in the interviews. Donors wanted the object to tell the personal story of the individual who had owned it, and/or of the survivor's own personal experience. Regarding objects owned by victims:

"Each of the objects I chose tells a different story."

"I selected objects that were important to him, that he enjoyed, that demonstrated his many interests and abilities. I want people to see them and know who he was. I want to tell a human story."

"They represented his enormous achievement having come from a small town in India. The wine was personal and the most emotional object."

"The watch shows that he was just a regular guy."

"I wanted the objects to show who he was. Any way of showing who he was."

The information provided by the survivors demonstrates a need for the story of the event to be told accurately and their role in it:

"[The object] tells an interesting aspect of the story. It accurately represents my experience."

"I wanted the ID to be preserved. It was fading. They show the reason and impact for me being there."

"It was the most personal thing I could give. They are the set of artifacts that belonged to me. The dust [from his donated boots] belongs to the Port Authority."

One subject wanted her objects to tell the story of the event itself:

"They help explore the mystery and story of it all."

What associations or meanings does the object hold for you?

All eleven subjects spoke about the meanings of the objects to them, and in a few cases what the objects meant to the victims. One of the most common themes when describing the meanings and associations of the objects was power. Power emerged as a defining characteristic of the victims or of their work:

"The karate outfit was a part of his work and it protected him. His self-defense protected him in his work as a paramedic. The outfit helped him and made him strong."

Objects were also power symbols to survivors:

"They make me think of the people that perished. This [object] survived, they didn't survive. And I survived like them [the objects] too."

“The press badge allows you to have access. To be cocky. It gives you power even against people who are trying to keep you safe. There is a sense of pride among journalists. We share a story and a lot of power and access both good and bad.”

Objects also represented the power of the event over its victims:

“[In the museum] there is a display of the twisted airplane and melted spoons. It shows the power of the impact. This is important because it shows that people couldn’t escape.”

Another theme that emerged was about helping:

“The gun is him helping people. His decision to become a police officer was because he loved helping people. The gun is deeper than the other objects [I donated.]”

“The dog tags were important because he was very focused his entire life to being a soldier and helping people in his work.”

Other associations were about connection with a victim:

“It’s a connection to my husband. Precious moments.”

Or connection with the event:

“Each object tells a different part of the story of the day. First the ID badge, then the key, the triage gown. They tell the sequence of events. The reality of the day.”

Can you share the process you went through as you gifted your object to the museum?

Out of the eleven subjects, all delivered their objects in person – with the exception of one, who mailed hers in. One of the subjects sent things and also brought one in person. The subjects were very decisive about their choice to go alone or with others (family members.) In each case, the decision to be alone or with others was made so as to make the experience as comfortable as possible for the donor:

“I dreaded going to the museum but having family with me helped. It was a way of making a connection. Testing the waters.”

Most of the subjects donated objects that were part of the event: belongings that had been recovered from the site and returned, or items that the donors wore or carried with them throughout the day. Most of the subjects brought their objects to The National September 11 Memorial & Museum in the ziplock bag in which the recovered object had been returned to them. One subject ceremoniously placed his objects in a glass box, while two others carried the objects loose in their handbags. When describing the experience of donating:

“Opening the bag was heartbreaking. I laid them out.”

“I placed them together in the glass box and placed the folded flag on top of them. They’re in good hands. I sent them off but I feel like I’m continuing my mission. It’s not bittersweet.”

A couple of donated objects were personal to the victims but had not been in the event. These were carefully prepared for donation:

“I washed it before bringing it.”

“I ironed it, wrapped it in tissue paper. I wanted it to look as good as possible.”

As for the subject who did not go in person to donate the item:

“I wrapped it and sent it in a UPS box. I sent it off but it didn’t feel like an end. He’s not going to get thrown out that way.”

“His [telescope] lens is safer in the museum.”

Is public display of the object important to you? If so, why?

Nine of the eleven subjects felt it was very important that their objects were put on display. Two donors were ambivalent. Of the subjects who felt strongly about display, two themes were predominant: reassurance that the story of the victim and of the event is being told; and concern about displaying multiple donated objects together as a group and in a particular order. This concern was also related to telling the story of the event in accurate fashion:

“It felt good to know people could know a little about him.”

“People will wonder about me. She made it. She was a survivor. Of course it’s important they know I survived.”

“You don’t know if your story is right. When you can lay out the objects you can make sure what you remembered was close to what really happened.”

“It puts who he was on display. It’s important for him.”

I hope it will be [on display]. But I’m going to move on. Giving was what was important.”

The two donors who were ambivalent about whether the objects were on display expressed a sense of distance from the objects:

“It’s humbling. It’s not important but I have tremendous pride that my triage tag is on display. I’m assured the story lives on. It’s comforting.”

“The whole thing is wrapped up for me.”

Do you feel changed in any way as a result of donating the object?

The majority of the responses to this final question can be found below in the statements that illustrate the object dynamics specifically. All subjects felt changed and/or impacted as a result of donating. Other responses expressed the perceived relationship of the subjects to the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, and many of these were quite powerful:

“My story braided into the museum. It’s a part of my identity.”
“The museum is a better steward of the object than me.”
“The museum is a protector of the objects. I can see them anytime.”
“I feel a tether to the museum and that feels good. Permanence of my story of that day. It’s scaffolding.”
“People want to touch the steel, to write their names on it. It’s like a human body.” [Steel from site on display at memorial and museum]
“I feel enriched.”

All of the interviews specifically illustrated object dynamics:

Releasing/Unburdening

“I feel positive [about the experience of donating.] A little freer. I almost want to give them everything.” (Widow donated late husband’s tie and gun)
“You feel a little bit of weight was lifted off you. It lifted my spirit a little. It was time. It kind of helped me to move forward a little.” (Survivor donated work ID card and bank cards from wallet)
“It helped me on the road to recovery. All those little steps along the way.” (Widow donated late husband’s cellphone, watch, suspenders, dollar bills and soccer ball)
“I had his wallet which was covered in blood. I burned it right away. In the fire pit.” (Widow)

Associating

“This is the newest 911 memorial! I feel a part of me is missing when I don’t have it.” (First responder continuously carries a piece of steel from the site in his pocket)
“Other objects [I didn’t donate to the museum] from my wallet I framed and put on my wall. I want to look at them. I want to think about them. I show them to people who come to my house.” (Survivor’s burned and damaged contents from wallet)

Giving/Receiving

“I’m a giver, I like to share. Giving is a part of mending. I’ve donated all over the country and when a place denied the offer it was unpatriotic. They were denying the public and the country.” * (Giving/Receiving is seen in the frustrations of this first responder whose object wasn’t accepted. His experience was one of personal rejection.)
“The act of giving to the museum and (deceased husband’s) wine to relatives was very emotional.”

Composing

“It’s important that they stay together and are displayed in a group. It accurately reflects what the experience was. You can’t fake that.” (Survivor who donated series of items that were with him on the 90th floor through his escape and release from medical care.)

* The responder donated objects to the 9/11 Memorial Museum. In this quote, the donor is not referring to the 9/11 Memorial Museum as the place that denied his offer.

“They are like my twin boys. They belong together, they are a family. Viewing the objects is important to them.” (First responder donated boots and uniform.)

“I put my medal [award for her work at the Trade Towers] next to objects of [my late husband] in a curio box. It’s a shrine in my home.” (Dual survivor and widow)

“I thought everything would be together but they aren’t and that is bothersome. I wish they were all together.” (Widow donated dogtags and binder outlining safety plans for the World Trade Center)

“The museum cut up the shadow box that had been a collection. I was devastated.”[†]
(Mother who donated deceased son’s equestrian ribbons and memorabilia.)

Making

“I’ve written four books since the moment and it’s very cathartic. Purging. It’s a way of emptying yourself. It helps me process and make meaning of the experience.” (Journalist donated press badge and triage gown)

Finally, thoughts emerged regarding whether placemaking might be a therapeutic dynamic via these examples:

“I feel like a part of the museum. It anchors me to the site. That’s important because it’s accurate. Place is so important. Location brings relevancy.” (Survivor)

“Place for objects is so important.” (First responder)

[†] In this instance the subject incorrectly believes that the 911 Memorial Museum disassembled her donated collection of objects. The shadow box is currently intact as donated.

Synthesis

The following information synthesizes the meaning of each dynamic along with its psychological healthful/healing attributes as witnessed in both phases of research activity: the illustrative examples from Trails Carolina, the interview with Professor Ross Laird, and interviews with the National September 11 Memorial & Museum object donors.

Releasing/Unburdening

Definition

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

The healthful/healing attributes of Releasing/Unburdening include:

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

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

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

Associating

Definition

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

The healthful/healing attributes of Associating include:

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

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

- Students naming, labeling and marking their bows (Trails Carolina)
- Students taking home dirty and worn mountain clothing (Trails Carolina)
- First responder continuously carries a piece of steel from the site in his pocket, (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Survivor's burned and damaged contents from wallet (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)

Giving/Receiving

Definition

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

The healthful/healing attributes of Giving/Receiving include:

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

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

- Phase achievement beads (Trails Carolina)

- Widow donated deceased husband's wine to Memorial and Museum and her relatives. (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- First responder whose object wasn't accepted into a different institution's collection. (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)

Composing

Definition

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

The healthful/healing attributes of Composing include:

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

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

- Students constructing found object labyrinths (Trails Carolina)
- Survivor who donated series of items that were with him on the 90th floor through his escape and eventual release from medical care (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- First responder donated boots and uniform (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Dual survivor and widow's home shrine with medal and late husband's objects in a curio box. (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Widow donated dogtags and binder outlining safety plans for the World Trade Center. (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)
- Mother who donated deceased son's equestrian ribbons and memorabilia. (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)

Making

Definition

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

The healthful/healing attributes of Making include:

Self awareness
Self-regulation
Stabilization
Mindfulness
Emotional Grit
Resilience
Containment

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

- Bow drilling (Trails Carolina)
- Journalist's four books subsequent to the event (The National September 11 Memorial & Museum case study)

Implications and Next Steps

Further Research

Based on the findings of the first two phases of research, two themes emerged for further targeted investigation. The Therapeutic Object Dynamic *Making* supports inquiry as shown in the field work conducted at Trails Carolina and in the clinical work of Ross Laird. *Making* was also seen as a dynamic action in one of the case study interviews. It is reasonable to identify a specific opportunity to seek additional fortifying evidence of *Making* in a museum environment so as to further define and explore the complexities of this theme. Additionally, the emergence of *Place Making* in the case study interviews suggests that it might be a viable Therapeutic Object Dynamic and merits further inquiry.

Furthermore, our investigations have revealed the powerful connections between objects and the process of healing psychological trauma. Our subjects consistently spoke in psychotherapeutic terms, instinctively connecting their objects (and the experience of donation) to deep themes of personal healing, renewal, transformation, growth, and integration. The personal journey of the subjects matched closely the themes and steps of the therapeutic process. In many ways, the subjects were following an explicitly therapeutic process. Some were aware of it; others less so. But in every case, the intent of the subjects was to encourage and promote psychological healing in themselves and others. In particular, the healing of trauma was a core theme, which suggests that object experiences offer new possibilities for integrating psychological growth with museum experiences.

Potential Applications

Evaluation Instrument

The Therapeutic Object Dynamics could reasonable be utilized as an evaluative instrument. They could be formed into a metric with which an existing institution could measure the therapeutic impacts and outcomes of their exhibitions.

Exhibition Development

The Therapeutic Object Dynamics could be utilized as a strategic methodology for the co-creation of an exhibition(s) with the intent of providing healthful and healing opportunities and outcomes for museum staff, audiences and community constituencies (associating). In this instance the researchers could collaborate with an existing institution, and/or a foundation or trust, and/or a targeted community. The exhibition initiative could customize and use any or all of the Therapeutic Object Dynamics as appropriate.

One strategy to target would be an environment that actively changes over time as a result of audience engagement: open source collecting and contributing (releasing/unburdening); design

that encourages composing and re-composing exhibits (composing); creative activity spaces (making) and opportunities for reciprocity within the space (giving/receiving).

Case Study

The Therapeutic Object Dynamics could be further defined and viewed via case study. This could be focused on seeking further evidence for *Making* and *Place Making*, and/or could involve an opportunity to study the theory with all of its elements.

The Museum as Healer

Psychological trauma follows distinct pathways of disorientation, overwhelm, psychological distress, loss of containment, and fragmentation, followed by healing journeys involving containment, resourcefulness, and resilience. One of the challenges of museums that expose visitors to traumatic events is that the initial pathways of trauma are activated at the museum (disorientation, overwhelm, psychological distress, loss of containment, and fragmentation), and the healing aspects are left for visitors to manage on their own. Consequently, there is some danger that visitors to museums that exhibit traumatic material may themselves be traumatized by the experience of the visit. The sequela of such experiences can be long lasting and difficult, especially for those who have previously been traumatized by an event associated with the contents of an exhibit.

There are tremendous possibilities for designing and/or adapting exhibits so as to think more mindfully about the consequences of highly activating exhibits. Our research shows that Therapeutic Object Dynamics offer an outstanding model for encouraging containment, developing resourcefulness, and promoting resilience among those who have experienced a traumatic event and are associated with an exhibit focused on that event. A few basic, supportive strategies that are commonly used in trauma healing to encourage containment, resourcefulness, and resilience for visitors would be straightforward to implement, contributing to visitor safety, comfort, and healing. This is of keen interest to us as we move forward with this work.

Appendix A

Invitation to Participate

April 20th, 2016
Associate Professor Brenda Cowan
Chairperson, Graduate Exhibition Design
SUNY/Fashion Institute of Technology
27th Street @ Seventh Avenue #B231
New York, NY 10001

Dear Sir/Madame,

As someone who has made a very thoughtful and kind object donation to the collections at the September 11th Memorial and Museum, I would like to extend a personal invitation to you to participate in a research study about your experience with donating. You were recommended by the museum as a possible participant because of your generous donation and the positive impact it has made.

The purpose of this study is to learn about the reasons why you chose to donate your personal object, what the experience of donating was like, and what your feelings are now after having donated. The researchers leading the project are experts in museum studies and object-based therapy, and we hope to learn whether the experience of donating has had a healing impact on the donors. The information learned would help museums and institutions that collect and display objects learn why and how objects are meaningful to people, and the psychological community would gain valuable insight into the healing impact of dealing with trauma through the release of personal objects.

We are hoping you would be willing to participate in either a facilitated focus group with approximately 7-10 other 9/11 relatives who have donated objects in memory of loved ones, or if you prefer, a private 30-minute long personal interview. If you do not live locally and would like to join in the study we would be very happy to arrange a Skype interview with you. The in-person sessions will take place in my office located on the West 27th street campus of the Fashion Institute of Technology. The focus group and personal interviews will take place between June 8th – 11th to be arranged at times most convenient to you.

If you are able to participate, we will provide you with all of the details of what to expect and the questions that will be asked so as to make the experience as clear and comfortable for you as possible. You will not be asked to provide identifying information other than your relationship to the object that you donated.

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

Associate Professor Brenda Cowan, Chairperson, Graduate Exhibition Design at SUNY Fashion Institute of Technology, www.fitnyc.edu <http://www.fitnyc.edu/exhibition-design/faculty/brenda-cowan.php>;

Professor Ross Laird, PhD, Interdisciplinary Creative Process, MA, Counseling Psychology, <http://www.rosslaird.com>;

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

I would like to thank you so much for your consideration, and I hope we will be able to include you in this study that aims to help museums and the therapeutic community, and the many people that they serve.

Most Sincerely,

Brenda Cowan

Appendix B

Interview Script

Individual interviews
30 minutes

1. Why did you choose to donate an object to the Memorial?
2. Why did you select the object that you did?
3. What associations or meanings does the object hold for you?
4. Can you share the process you went through as you gifted your object to the museum?
5. Is public display of the object important to you? If so, why?
6. Do you feel changed in any way as a result of donating the object?