Understanding the process of the disposition of a loved one's possessions using a theoretical framework of grief [1]

Abstract

This paper aims to understand how people manage the mass of objects accumulated by a deceased relative. We argue that the practices in respect of the deceased's possessions depend on the evolution of the relationship of the bereaved to the deceased. To understand this relationship, we draw on the concept of grief. Sixteen interviews with bereaved individuals show that management of the deceased's accumulated belongings follows a process punctuated by four periods depending on the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased: numbness (confronting the absence of the deceased and paralysis with regard to his objects); yearning (looking for the lost person through his possessions by trying to maintain a link to them); personal disorganization (experiencing negative emotions towards the deceased, which may lead the bereaved to transgress personal values and throw things out); and finally reorganization/reconstruction (making the deceased "live" by forging another relationship to his possessions and revisiting the meaning of the consumption of products). These results allow us to enrich the understanding of the process of dispossession of non-transmitted items. They also show that clearing the house of a deceased relative leads the bereaved to consume less and/or in a different way (collaborative consumption).

Key words: disposition behavior, object relationships, death, grief, consumption

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Introduction

Death is a topic that has been extensively addressed in sociology and anthropology (Gorer 1965; Louis-Vincent 1975; Lofland 1985; Déchaux 2001; Clavandier 2009). Marketing researchers are increasingly focusing on death (Dobscha 2016) variously by examining the treatment of death in advertising (Henley and Donovan 1999); the encounter between funeral services companies and the bereaved (O'Donohoe and Turley 2005); death and disposal (Gabel, Mansfield and Westbrook 1996; Canning and Szmigin 2010) and consumption behavior following the death of a relative (Gentry et al. 1995b; Bonsu and Belk 2003). The death of a loved one is followed by a period of grief for the family. During this time of high vulnerability (Gentry et al. 1995a), individuals may often have to manage the goods and possessions of the deceased (Bradford 2009; Lovatt 2015). The aim of this paper is to understand how the emotional response to death, namely grief, may explain people's practices regarding the deceased's possessions.

Grief is a painful personal emotional state caused by the loss of a "love object", in the form of a person or pet, but also an idea, a job, a material object one is strongly attached to, organization, and so forth. Bereavement refers to the period following the loss and the state which people are then in. Various theoretical approaches provide an understanding of this emotional experience related to loss (Plaud and Urien 2016): the psychoanalytic model of "grief work" (Freud 1917), cognitive theories of adaptation to stressful bereavement (Billings and Moos 1981), attachment theory (Bowlby 1960), and different models explaining the

stages of grief (Kubler-Ross 1969; Worden 1982; Walsh and McGoldrick 1991; Régnier 1991; Rando 1993; Hétu 1994; Monbourquette 1994).

These latter models explain that grief has both a psychological and social dimension: *psychological*, since when someone is attached to the deceased, he/she enters a period of loss and feelings of sadness often accompanied by depression (Freud 1917; Kübler-Ross 1969; Bennett, Gibbons and Mackenzie-Smith 2010). Grief is also a *social* concept: individual feelings and the bereaved's mental state affect his capacity to maintain or enter into a relationship with an object (material or a person, Gentry et al. 1995b).

The marketing literature on grief has shown its influence on the purchase of products/services following the death of a celebrity (Radford and Bloch 2012) or related to the funeral of a loved one (Bonsu and Belk 2003), as well as its disruptive impact on family decision-making (Gentry et al. 1995a, 1995b). In the period of private and personal grief, people have to take a number of decisions as to what they are going to do with the deceased's possessions. The management of possessions of a family member and/or elderly relative has been studied though i) the objects passed on by the elderly (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988; Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000; Marcoux 2001; Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004); ii) consumer practices regarding the management of the mass of objects accumulated by a person who, for health reasons, must move to a smaller home or to a nursing home (Ekerdt, Luborsky and Lysack 2012; Marcoux 2001); iii) consumer practices with regard to the possessions of a deceased person (Kates 2001; Lovatt 2015).

While research has reported on the variety of individual practices for managing the objects of a usually still living relative (keeping, selling, donating, discarding), the psychological and social mechanisms that lead the bereaved to choose one option rather than another are not clearly understood. The reason is that these practices have been studied statically (Marcoux 2001; Eckerdt and Sergeant 2006; Ekerdt, Luborsky and Lysack 2012), whereas separation

from something is in fact processual (Roster 2001, 2014). Thus, we argue that decisions with regard to the deceased's mass of objects evolve in accordance with the development of the bereaved's "different" relationship to the deceased.

This paper reports findings from a qualitative study conducted in France. Mourning varies significantly across cultures: death has a different meaning from one society to another (Dobscha 2016). In traditional societies (unlike Western societies), death is seen as a process in which the deceased passes from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead. This process is characterized by the practice of three types of rituals: rituals marking biological death, mourning rituals, and rituals marking the social death of the deceased (Bonsu and Belk 2003). Beliefs about and perceptions of the process of death, grief and rituals are strongly determined by the ethnicity of the individual. Race, religion, place of birth, language, socio-economic background and the nature of the family unit act as a filter on the perception of life and death (Yick and Gupta 2002; Rubin and Yasien-Esmael 2004).

Conducted with white French people raised as Christians (whether now atheist, agnostic or practicing), the present study shows that practices of disposing objects during this initial period of grief (Gentry et al. 1995b) revolve around a process consisting of four, not necessarily linear, periods: (1) *numbness* (confrontation with the absence of the deceased and paralysis with regard to his objects); (2) *yearning* (search for the lost person through his objects by sharing them among relatives); (3) *disorganization and despair* (negative emotions toward the deceased that can lead to frantically getting rid of his possessions and violating personal standards) and finally (4) *reorganization/reconstruction* (preserving the memory of the deceased by forging a different relationship to his objects and redefining the meaning of the consumption of objects).

The paper is organized as follows. First, the background literature explains the process of disposition of objects, the theory of grief and the cultural background. Next, the study

methods and analysis procedures are described, followed by the findings. The discussion sums up how the mobilization of the concept of grief enriches the understanding of the dispossession process (Roster 2001) and suggests directions for future research.

Background literature

Death is a rite of passage (Van Gennep 1960) that involves numerous rituals (Bonsu and Belk 2003) and acts of consumption (O'Donohoe and Turley 2005). When the procedures related to the deceased's body are complete, another task awaits his relatives: emptying his house or other living space (Kates 2001; Lovatt 2015). This task requires (1) separating oneself from the deceased's objects and engaging in a process of their dispossession; (2) choosing what practices to adopt regarding them which in turn (3) raises the question of how to work through the loss of the other, in other words, grieving.

Disposition of objects as the outcome of a process of self-detachment

Dispossession is a "psychological and emotional process in which consumers relinquish self-ties to possessions" (Roster 2001). This implies that the people concerned have at one time or another viewed the objects as "theirs" (Pierce, Kostova and Dirks 2003). When the relationship to objects is very ingrained in them, they may experience their separation as the loss of a part of themselves (Belk 1988). The separation may be abrupt, as in the case of an involuntary loss (theft, natural disasters, accidents), but generally occurs in stages without the person necessarily being aware of it (Young 1991). Thus detachment from an object is divided up into several stages (Roster 2001). (1) People will stay clear of household objects. This "cooling off" period (McCracken 1988) changes the relationship to the object and

facilitates separation. (2) People will recognize the changes in the relationship to objects, which gradually shift from “me” to “not me” possessions (Kleine, Kleine and Allen 1995; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005). (3) People will have rituals for disinvesting themselves from an object, for example cleaning it prior to selling it in a flea market, or by storytelling (Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000). (4) Evaluation of the separation. People may feel real relief at having separated themselves from an object or, conversely, may experience negative emotions such as regret (Roster 2001). Finally, (5) psychological and emotional severance when the link to the object no longer exists.

Dispossession behavior is linked to disposition behavior. Disposition behavior (i.e. voluntary disposition) is a set of practices that represent the physical and emotional separation of a consumer from a possession (Cherrier 2009; Cherrier and Murray 2010). Choosing practices for getting rid of objects is a process that depends on the objects and situations concerned (Hanson 1980; Young and Wallendorf 1989; Young 1991; Roster 2001). Among the different life situations that involve getting rid of objects, the departure of an elderly person for a medicalized institution or his death activates a set of practices for managing the mass of objects accumulated.

People’s practices for clearing the home of a relative

With advancing age, older people sometimes decide to move into a smaller living space (Marcoux 2001). They must then choose between what they take to their new dwelling and what they leave behind. Sometimes older people give or bequeath their “cherished” possessions to people who deserve them, feeding the need for symbolic immortality (Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000; Marcoux 2001). Older people also sometimes want to or feel obliged to pass on family heirlooms, having themselves been left them some time previously

(Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004): it is then a matter of finding the “right” recipient for items that will perpetuate the family history and/or collective memory (Podoshen and Hunt 2009).

Relatives, however, may be responsible for managing a person’s possessions (Ekerdt and Sergeant 2006; Ekerdt, Luborsky and Lysack 2012). In this case, they decide on the destination of the objects, either in consultation with the elderly person or “taking their place” if he is no longer able to participate in decision-making. The choice is made according to what they imagine the elderly person’s relationship to his objects to be or has been (Ekerdt and Addington 2015). Thus they will give emotionally charged objects – which may be mundane objects (Kuruoğlu and Ger 2014) – to relatives of the deceased. When the relationship to the objects is instrumental, they will instead tend to keep them, give them to charity shops so that objects continue their existence and have a second life (Lovatt 2015), or to give them away so that they can re-used for artistic projects (Roster 2014). Such objects may also be sold in flea markets (Roster 2001), with selling sometimes sliding into donation when the purchaser has a feel for the item (Herrmann 1997).

Emptying a living space and sometimes the space of *a* life is thus a highly emotional task for the relatives – often women (Addington and Ekerdt 2012) – who come to help. The help given is often solely physical – carrying items, putting things in cartons, etc. – when the elderly person is still living, because *only* that person knows their history and significance. For the old people too, it is a very emotional task (Marcoux 2001; Lovatt 2015), in the sense that they are revisiting their past through the objects, which can result in them experiencing positive emotions (joy) or negative emotions (sadness) or a mixture of the two (nostalgia). It is also a difficult task when the relative has died, since every object embodies the loss of that person (Gentry et al. 1995b; Kates 2001; Lovatt 2015).

Managing the loss of the other: from "grief work" to the process of grief (psychological and cultural aspects)

The pioneering work that enabled us to understand grief was in the field of psychoanalysis. Freud (1917) and then Lindemann (1944) speak of "grief work": they describe how, on the death of a loved one, relatives are overwhelmed by feelings of sadness. They are unable to take an interest in the outside world, and are subject to intense memories that tie them to the deceased and by the expectations and hopes invested in him. Very gradually, the grief work should result in the bereaved unraveling all the ties binding them to the deceased and becoming free to invest in new living love objects. These Freudian propositions are linked to a conception of the person as solely a living entity: people are endowed with a psychic apparatus, and grief consists of work internal to this apparatus. The dead exist only in the form of fantasy and memory, and there is nothing beyond the intra-psychic.

It is precisely this last point that has been widely criticized by many authors in psychology and psychiatry (Kubler-Ross 1969; Worden 1982; Walsh and McGoldrick 1991; Rando 1993), according to whom, grief is about *transforming the link* to the deceased rather than abolishing it. In fact, grieving is not what happens to the person alone, but is what happens to a *relationship* in which the bereaved person is implicated. The models evolved to take more into account the interpersonal nature of any death, a feature that lies at the heart of the question of grief (Lofland 1985). The experience of grief is the experience that with the death of the other a world that has to be thought about ends. Losing one's grandparents not only means losing the world of childhood, not only losing a link with a past that no longer exists, but losing a relationship that is still rich in unfulfilled possibilities. Thus grieving is an effort to renegotiate a coherent life story (Neimeyer, Prigerson and Davies 2002) and to "continue or relinquish bonds" (Schut et al. 2006). Rituals, local cultures, and different discourses

(medical, psychological, religious) allow the meaning of the loss to be worked through. It is no longer a question of psychologizing grief but of *socializing* it, by inviting the bereaved to engage in the intimate work of coming to terms with the loss while seeking the social practices and rituals be able to honor the deceased (Bonsu and Belk 2003) and to retain the possibility of later symbolic exchanges with him or her (Dreyer 2008).

The Freudian psychoanalytic legacy thus lost its point of anchorage, which facilitated the development of other methodological approaches for analyzing grief, especially through the formalization of different grief models, but with variations in the number of stages (from three to seven) or their sequence (Kubler-Ross 1969; Worden 1982; Walsh and McGoldrick 1991; Regnier 1991; Rando 1993; Hétu 1994; Monbourquette 1994). However, there are stages in common among these different models of grief: numbness, yearning, searching for the lost person, disorganization, despair and, finally, reorganization.

While death is universal and everyone is sooner or later faced with the death of another, the emotional experience of death – grief – is personal and depends on various factors including culture: "grief may be profoundly socially shaped and thus highly particularized across time and place" (Lofland 1985: 173). Several dimensions account for the cultural differences in managing the someone's death: the relation to religion and how religion conceives of death; the way we experience and communicate emotions, the latter being socially embedded; how people interact with others (Rosenblatt, Walsh and Jackson 1976; Bonanno and Kaltman 2001). For example, in some cultures where exchanges continue between the living and the dead (Japan and China, for example), the bereaved maintain a relationship with the deceased by making offerings (Lalande and Bonanno 2006). Such practices are an exchange in the sense that the bereaved expects protection, prosperity, luck and fertility from the deceased (Chan et al. 2005). In Islam, the funeral rites involve three days of family mourning, during which time women may not wear jewelry, perfume and

makeup or dye their hair. The mourning period itself (known as the *iddah* in Arabic) lasts four months and ten days (Brahami 2005).

Every culture thus has a unique and evolving relationship with death and bereavement. The following section will consider the form this takes in France.

Cultural Background: the deritualization of death and mourning in France

As elsewhere in the west and unlike certain African countries (Bonsu and Belk 2003), death has been deritualized in France (Ariès 1974). The old rituals that articulated the various stages of the demise (its announcement, arranging the funeral, the after-funeral meal, letters of condolence, mourning) have in most cases disappeared. Until relatively recently (roughly the 1960s), the final hours of a person's existence were one of the key moments of collective life (Louis-Vincent 1975): the dying person was at home surrounded by his or her loved ones. Friends and neighbors got together to announce the death, arrange the funeral, and provide support to the family. The place and role of the bereaved were clearly defined: everyone knew what they should say or do, including wearing the dark clothes of mourning for a least a year. Wearing black (the color of death and mourning in France) was primarily a form of stable social organization that designated the terms of the interaction between the bereaved and the rest of the community. Death was ritualized, with the social and psychological consequences. *Socially*, rituals ground membership of a community: they affirm and renew the order of common world and celebrate the passage to the afterlife and/or lineage through memory (Bonsu and Belk 2003). *Psychologically*, rituals emphasize the irreversibility of the loss and allow the bereaved to detach themselves from the deceased (Clavandier 2009). In sum, mourning was part of everyday life and the bereaved had the social tools – rituals – to get through this difficult period.

For the last fifty years death has been hidden: it takes place in an institution (in France, three quarters of deaths occur in hospital or retirement homes), and the announcement is made by telephone (or sometimes SMS). The wake is now held in funeral parlors (for 30% of deaths), the hospital morgue. The rituals have been gradually erased or trivialized under the influence of modernity and its characteristics: individualism (loneliness and anonymity), a new relationship to time, urbanization, market society (Cherblanc 2011). We now see “DIY ritual” for arranging the funeral: going to the church (in 80% of cases) though without any religious conviction (only 20% of French people say they are regular churchgoers) and the personalization of the religious ceremony (replacement of sacred music by songs that the deceased liked). This practice, stripped of religious and symbolic content, is maintained so as to not let the deceased depart “just like that” (Bacqué and Hanus 2014). Accompanying the dead at funerals then becomes a subjective experience. The aim is no longer to affiliate oneself but to mutually acknowledge an intimate experience. The socialization of death and bereavement follows channels other than ritual: it is based more on inter-subjectivity and greater solitude. This shift has consequences for how grieving occurs: “the decline of well-developed death rituals has pathologically extended grief’s normal course” (Lofland 1985: 174). The deritualization of death and mourning has thus affected the relationship to the deceased and to what they represent, including their possessions. We will now see how, through interviews with people who have experienced the loss of a loved one.

Methods

Data collection and sample

The data collection took place over seven years. Respondents were interviewed at different times: immediately after the death, and a few months or even years later. Four people were interviewed several times depending on how the clearing of the house was developing, but the majority of them were interviewed just once. The initial informants were recruited by word of mouth, originally for a study on hoarding behavior. Other respondents were recruited following an academic conference on the management of items that people no longer had a use for. At the end of the conference, two people spontaneously introduced themselves to the researcher and related a specific experience of managing objects: clearing the house of a relative. They were the basis for data collection, in that they put us in contact with other people around them who had had a similar experience. Finally, calls for testimonies were posted on a donation and a resale website, leading to the recruitment of two further people. In total, sixteen people were interviewed.

Interviews were conducted on an individual basis: each person, sometimes from the same family, undergoing the same loss, experiences bereavement differently (Gentry et al. 1995b; Gilbert 1996). They took place face to face except for the two individuals recruited on the websites, with whom the interviews were conducted by phone. The interviews took place variously at the respondent's home, at the home of the deceased during and/or after clearing it, and at the university. Respondents were aged between 32 and 75 and mainly belonged to two social classes: middle class and upper class. For the analysis, we retained only those experiences of death which concerned an older generation (parents, grandparents), whatever the circumstances (old age and/or disease). Indeed, grief varies according to the level and significance of the relationship to the deceased (Lofland 1985), whether a child (Kates 2001) or a spouse (Gentry et al. 1995b; Richardson 2014). Some interviewees nevertheless were still grieving from experiences other than those they told us about: one respondent, for example, had lost an 18-year-old daughter. Moreover, the sample was diverse in terms of the

experience of grief and of clearing a house: most of them had experienced these events several times, and others only once. Finally, all the bereaved questioned spoke of a house owned by the deceased, a fact that gave them flexibility in terms of when to clear it.

The interview guide was structured around five general themes: (1) the deceased (family relationship; age; salience of the relationship in terms of frequency and emotion, the personality of the deceased); (2) the death (circumstances); (3) the deceased's place of residence (family home, a house in which the bereaved did or did not live); (4) the way the house was cleared (time taken to start clearing it, persons present at each visit to the house, the decision taken regarding the contents, the role of the spouse and children of the bereaved, but also of the friends and neighbors of the bereaved and the deceased); (5) the relationships to the deceased's belongings (awareness of them, their history, etc.). The interviews enabled respondents to relate how they experienced the loss of a family member and their attitude towards to the deceased's possessions. The respondents also mentioned the changes they had personally undergone since the relative died and following this house clearance experience. Finally they talked about how they viewed their behavior regarding future generations.

Death is a taboo subject for most French people, a source of anxiety that is difficult to address (Urien 2003). Moreover, in some families, grief and more generally the emotions are openly expressed, while in others they are more hidden (Linnet, McGill and Shavitt 2009). This difference means that the researcher has to define his own position with regard to the bereaved during the interviews. In this study, the white French researcher shared the same cultural and social capital as the respondents, thus allowing a degree of relational proximity. Conducting interviews nevertheless called for the deployment of personal qualities to cope with the pain and distress of the respondent. Indeed, asking interviewees to talk about the deceased and what happened his or her possessions, and how these were divided up among siblings are issues that can re-open wounds and give rise to sadness. Thus prior to the

interviews the researcher had to consider what was necessary – and possible – to mobilize in talking to these saddened individuals. Several questions thus arose for the researcher: i) How to find "comforting" words when the respondent is weeping; ii) Are words necessary or is silence preferable?, and iii) How to deal with one's own emotions during the respondent's account. No strictly defined approach for conducting the interviews was established. Depending on the interviewee, the researcher used various tools to respond to the individual's emotional state, choosing a pace appropriate to the interview, stopping at emotionally charged moments, altering the order of the questions, suggesting that painful points should be addressed later, listening sympathetically and adopting a benevolent, reassuring and understanding attitude. In addition the researcher made sure that the interviews ended on a lighter note, returning to amusing stories recounted by the respondents, so that they would leave the interview in a stable emotional state. Although the interviews re-awakened feelings of sadness, most respondents expressed their satisfaction, either orally at the end of the interview or by sending a message afterwards, at "being able to talk about it (again) to someone." A complete list of informants, along with their relationship to the deceased and their grieving experience, is presented in Table 1.

Table1.

Data analysis

The consumer researcher used phenomenological inquiry (Thompson et al. 1989). This approach relies on people's testimony concerning their beliefs, experiences, ways of life and the meaning that emerges from them. Although the topic was highly emotional, the researcher nevertheless took a certain distance in analyzing the respondents' accounts and maintained a

critical state of mind. Accordingly, the analysis was carried out one interview at a time, after always allowing a certain amount of time to pass to “cool off” the interviews emotionally. The data was interpreted by moving from an *etic* perspective (an essentially external and theoretical point of view) toward an *emic* perspective (internal standpoint). The latter involved using the words of the respondents in order to capture their lived experience. The second precaution in interpreting the data was to treat it autonomously, without seeking to verify it externally and without making any assumptions based on what respondents said (Thompson et al, 1989: 140). The presumptions were initially bracketed, by re-reading the interviews several times and seeking to understand the experience of losing a loved one and the meaning for respondents of the practices regarding the deceased’s possessions, rather than providing theoretical explanations. The words “bereavement” and/or “mourning” occurred in the respondents’ accounts in talking about how to cope with and think about the loss of the deceased, as appeared from the temporalities in the changing ways of relating to and dealing with their possessions. For each respondent, “moments” were identified by a constellation of emotions experienced by the bereaved: sadness, sometimes joy in recalling memories or anecdotes, fear, anxiety, anger, guilt, disappointment, revenge, frustration, depression, regret, surprise, disgust. As well as their cognitive processes the respondents also talked about physical sensations that they had not had before the bereavement – such as confusion, hallucinations with the apparently real presence of the deceased person, difficulty in concentrating, and dreams about the deceased – and behavior that the respondents said was unusual for them, but are characteristic of ‘normal’ grieving – such as troubling sleeping, social withdrawal, speaking out loud to the deceased, agitated over-activity or, the reverse, apathy and spending hours “doing nothing”, bouts of crying, and visiting places where the deceased had lived (Lofland 1985; Bacqué and Hanus 2014). These emotions and cognitions were linked, in the respondents’ discourse, with “ways of doing things” with regard to the

deceased's belongings, involving the wish variously to keep "everything", store them, lock them away, keep them at a distance, give them away, do nothing, wait, ignore them, or throw them out and destroy them. Thus the combination of emotion, cognitions and behaviors in relation to the deceased's possessions brought out different moments that chimed with the literature on the different stages of grief. The analysis shows that the relationship to the deceased and the deceased's possessions, and therefore the decisions taken with regard to the latter, may, in the same individual, change over time. This relationship highlights the dynamic, processual and normative nature of grief: individuals may go back and forth between different stages of grief depending on how they work through the loss of the other.

Lastly, as the interviews were conducted in French, we faced the problem of translating the narratives into English. To deal with these difficulties, we first asked a professional translator to translate the narratives. He provided a domesticated translation, in other words a translation that allows the sense of the words to be rendered as accurately as possible (Agar 2011). We then discussed with the translator the best way, depending on the context, to translate the French word "deuil". In English, in fact, there are three possible translations: mourning, grief/grieving, and bereavement. Furthermore, drawing on other studies faced with similar translation problems (Dion, Sabri and Guillard 2014), we then *foreignized* the translations (Temple 2006): to a very small extent we reworked the English translation to come up with a style that better reflected the expressions used in French.

Findings

Whatever the context of death, ways of dealing with the deceased's belongings are structured around a process punctuated by four stages during which relationships to the object and to the deceased evolve: (1) *numbness*, with partial or total paralysis in respect of

deceased's possessions, (2) *yearning*, during which the bereaved seek the lost person by doing everything to preserve the link with the objects, (3) *personal disorganization*, the stage when negative emotions towards the deceased sometimes lead to frantically getting rid of what is left, and finally (4) *reconstruction* of a link to the deceased and his belongings, along with personal reorganization regarding the meaning of consumption.

Numbness: partial or lasting paralysis with regard to his possessions

Whatever the circumstances of the death of someone close (illness, old age), death is always a shock for the survivors, a shock that is expressed in different ways. Some people say "I don't believe it" (Kates 2001). Others want to see the deceased so as to be convinced that it is true or, conversely, that it cannot be (Dreyer 2008). Even if expected, the death of a loved one still retains an element of absurdity, of nonsense, something that people have difficulty incorporating into their individual narrative. The death of a loved one is the kind of event with a before and an after.

With the announcement of the death, relatives need to quickly embark on the administrative formalities regarding the body of the deceased. The funeral arrangements bring home the reality of the event. At the same time, people do not experience the loss very greatly at this point: they protect themselves psychologically by holding the inevitable pain at arm's length and by engaging in action, especially arranging the funeral (Kübler-Ross 1969). Thus the return to the deceased's home is often rapid: the official family record has to be located, as well as various documents for notifying the tax authorities of the death. The result is that this period is characterized by a certain emotional distance or even numbness regarding the deceased's possessions. The home (Serfaty-Garzon 2003) and possessions of the deceased

become sacred in that they crystallize – and are the only things that do so – the identity of the deceased, their way of life up to their departure, a final act (a book open at a particular page, for example), their history, tastes and areas of interest (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; O'Guinn and Belk 1989; Radford and Bloch 2012). The bereaved then have the greatest respect for these things that they often do not (yet) dare to touch.

> I had to go to the apartment and look for the family record book, I was nervous because I needed to find it but also totally paralyzed, I didn't dare touch anything, open anything, look at anything… yet I had to find it, so I was obliged to search. It took a while… After, I don't know, half a day, we found the family record book. (Pascal)

Between this first entry to the home of the deceased and taking the decision to empty it, a greater or lesser time may elapse depending on the heirs, especially when they have no immediate economic need to sell the deceased's home. The deritualization of death leads to its denial: the bereaved no longer celebrate a passage but an ending. The Vatican II funeral rite ends, moreover, with "the celebration of farewell" rather than with the symbolic expression of the destiny of the deceased. Thus "death as the end abolishes death as a dimension of our existence and leaves the dead wandering rather than departed, with the risk of the confusion of death with life" (Higgins 2003: 162). Death disappears and becomes the "non-living", thereby erasing the whole drama of the relationship between the living and the dead (Clavandier 2009). The relationship that modernity has with death and the denial it entails may be reflected by the avoidance and rejection of what the deceased (Déchaux, Hanus and Jésu 1998) and the deceased's possessions represent. Before clearing her mother's house, Brigitte "*waited for about eight months. We started to empty the house in October or November, and she died in February. On the other hand, my father's house [died five years previously] still hasn't been cleared, it's so isolated*." Gisèle, an atheist and only child, waited

before clearing her parents' house, since her father was the last surviving.

> In dad's apartment, I got there but I didn't go in, I was crying each time, we left everything as it was, without touching anything, for at least eighteen months… and their country house, we had to wait five or six years, I think (Gisèle)

Numbness as regards the deceased's possessions or even residence is part of the loss process (Kübler-Ross 1969). With passing time, the bereaved are increasingly confronted with the loss of the deceased and fall intermittently into moments of yearning in which they seek the lost individual(s) by taking care of their possessions.

Yearning: seeking departed people through their objects by trying to maintain links

This stage is characterized by dejection, melancholy and sadness. The feeling of the deceased's absence intensifies and the bereaved are sad.

> In fact, there was a very emotional period following the funeral, when we returned to the apartment and realized she was no longer there, and that it was really finished (Françoise)

During the yearning stage, the bereaved seek traces of the deceased in order to better preserve the link. This quest may take the form of touching or smelling garments, looking at photographs, listening to the deceased's voice on a recorded phone message or listening to his favorite music. Every thought, action and word is directed toward the deceased out of a visceral need to maintain a link. The deritualization of death and funeral arrangements in France leads people to deal with grief on their own. This "privatization" of death (Déchaux 2001) intensifies the experience of loss, which in turn may result in the bereaved having

greater difficulty separating themselves from the deceased's belongings. In this stage, the bereaved mistakenly think that the pain of grief can be assuaged by exercising control on objects. It is also the stage when they empty, or will soon begin to, the deceased's living space. The process of sorting the deceased's belongings by the members of the family then begins. So when a remaining parent dies, there will, depending on the family culture, often be a retrenchment of the nuclear family, which filters contacts with the outside world and ultimately "takes refuge" in the parental home. The parent's belongings are agents around which family links and even family identity crystallize (Epp and Price 2008). The family is the domain variously of life and links, of sharing, emotions and feelings, of interactions that give rise to an inter-relational dynamic. Indeed, the emphasis is no longer on affiliation through rituals but rather on mutual recognition of a private experience. This inward-turning culture varies in degree from family to family, but is one of the manifestations of the opposition between "us" and "them", between "inside" and "outside". The extent to which flows between territories is controlled is a good indicator of the sacralization of the family and of the home of the deceased.

> Initially, the most important thing is the fondness for her objects. It was quite painful, I felt rather demoralized, because mother was no longer there but I will almost say with pleasure, we brought her things back to life, looked at them, we spoke of our memories, we talked about her, all four of us children were there, the whole time. Never our spouses, just us four initially (Denise).

Then, in the second stage, the bereaved organize redistribution through "concentric circles", in accordance with people's emotional closeness to the deceased (Kates 2001). Indeed, in *this* period of grief, people adhere to a norm by which nothing belonging to the deceased is destroyed. The distribution of the deceased's possessions is done in a certain order: first, those closest to the deceased, so as not to lose contact with the items (Godbout and Caillé 1992),

then those who share self with the deceased (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005) or those who have been designated by the deceased in a will or in a conversation before his death. Sometimes the bereaved arrange times for those close to the items to take souvenirs and prolong memories of the deceased (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Podoshen and Hunt 2009).

After taking the items they want to keep and passing on some to other people, there are usually a considerable number of personal effects still left. Though these may not have enough significance to be kept, they are still either in perfect working order but of no interest to the heirs, or are outmoded if not yet worn out. The heirs then turn to "strangers" and resort to any other more anonymous options offered by the market and donation. Thus Sylvain: "*One by one I sold my parents' things for two or three euros on resale websites or gave them to donation websites. Doing it like that, little by little, I felt I was grieving and in particular respecting my parents*." Others choose charitable giving (Bajde 2009), flea markets (Herrmann 1997), and charity shops (Albinsson and Perera 2009; Lovatt 2015), or even dispose of the deceased's belongings on the sidewalk. Indeed, in some cities the sidewalk on bulky item collection days becomes a space for the anonymous circulation between those who deposit and those who glean (Brosius, Fernandez and Cherrier 2013; Guillard and Roux 2014). Sandrine recounts how she dealt with her aunt's things.

> What I kept, in fact, was also and above all what she liked. One day I went to look for my aunt's books. It was dreadful. I came back and collapsed, and I cried all afternoon. It was horrible, horrible. I was overwhelmed by sadness. It was her books. And I didn't expect they would have an effect like that on me. Every time I went there it was hard. But not like the first time. Then, a few times later… because not everything happens just like that, well, I needed time, we, it was necessary for us, we had a big get-together with close friends. And then, some time later, for the rest, I wanted to give it away to I no longer remember which charity. I got there with my suitcases.

> And the woman said to me, “There’s no longer any room, I can’t take it.” I must have looked desperate. It was so hard to take them, to put everything in the suitcases. I said, “Listen, you can’t make ME do that. I can’t take them back.” So she said to me, “Okay, I’ll take them.” And it wasn’t finished, it still wasn’t finished. Then I asked the caretaker, I said, “But what am I going to do? There’s no way out.” I was going crazy. He said, “Put them on the sidewalk. You’ll see, it’ll be gone in no time.” I said, “No!” He said. “Sure, do it.” Then I took out the stuff: lamps, knick-knacks, I stayed there, and five minutes later they were gone. I was staggered. I went up to one of the guys who was taking things and I said, “It was me who put that on the sidewalk. “Really? Do the lamps work?” I said, “Yes, they work fine.” He said, “Great!” [Laughs] I said to myself, “Wow! I’m going to bring out more things.” And I cleaned two or three things, and, just like that, they were gone. So like that I was happy, because they gave pleasure to people and the things continued their life.” (Sandrine)

This redistribution of objects through concentric circles may be interspersed or followed by periods of personal disorganization and confusion, since the bereaved sometimes experience negative emotions toward the deceased and their possessions.

Personal disorganization: negative emotions toward the deceased and their possessions

The stage of personal disorganization may recur at different times. It is a period during which people experience deep mental turmoil. The pain of loss does not manifest itself solely in the form of physical distress or bouts of crying. It is also expressed by negative emotions such as anger, aggression and depression, but also guilt regarding the deceased or his objects. Feeling aggressive and complaining are normal reactions in the grieving process (Kübler-Ross 1969; Gentry et al. 1995b). Anger or aggression may be directed against the deceased, using the

accumulated mass of objects as a justification. In France, as in other anxiety-prone and materialistic western countries (Cherrier and Ponnor 2010), some people have a strong tendency to accumulate possessions (Guillard and Pinson 2012). Very often, therefore, the burden of managing these falls on the heirs (Ekerdt and Sergeant 2006).

> We were rather angry with her [her mother] because there was too much, too much accumulated, I said to myself I don't believe it, she had made us buy things not so long ago, things that were there but forgotten, there were geological layers in the house. Like all old people, she kept a mass of bottles and pots, there were thousands of paper bags, but also as new linen, dishes, and planters for flowers (Gérard)

In order to manage these accumulated belongings, the bereaved, who are often mentally and emotionally exhausted, sometimes have no other option but to throw them out. Disposal is in fact a practical process: it involves distancing oneself from things that one no longer knows what to do with, but that people no longer want to see (Lucas 2002). Throwing things away may clash with societal and personal anti-waste values (Prothero and Fitchett 2000), often transmitted by the family or by the deceased (Grønhøj and Thøgersen 2009), with the result that the bereaved experience an identity crisis.

> Everything I threw out, all the stuff my parents had accumulated. I have a huge feeling of waste. The rest went in the trash, I arranged for a dumpster to come, I shut my eyes, it made me feel sick. After a while, one is so psychologically worn out and sometimes disturbed by what one finds, that all of sudden, one simplifies, one no longer thinks, one throws it out. I had a feeling of financial waste (Héloïse)

The death of a parent and its private management, as happens in France, gives rise to a more subjective and less social experience. The individualism and solitude of bereavement can further lead the bereaved to revisit family ties that sometimes involve bitterness, secrets and lies (Bacqué and Hanus 2014), something that would be unthinkable and very inappropriate in cultures that attach great importance to ancestors (Bonsu and Belk 2003). These negative emotions and/or grudges may have consequences on the management of deceased's belongings: the bereaved can speak of revenge when relations with the deceased have not always been healthy and positive. Christine was forced to empty the house of her stepfather, as her husband is disabled. She talks about her stepfather, with whom relations were strained.

> …not immediately after death, and not all the time, I felt vengeful. Although I'm not usually like that, I don't throw out things that can be reused, but there's stuff of my stepfather's that I deliberately broke, that I hurled through the second-floor window (...) I consider that he didn't respect me enough. He was charming with his friends, and detestable with his family (Christine)

Finally, in African culture (Bonsu and Belk 2003) and in some families in France (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004), especially among the upper classes (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 2010), people attach great importance to passing on knowledge, belongings, and the family history and lineage to the living. Yet in relatively affluent middle-class families, such transmission is not always in evidence or part of the culture, or else it pertains occasionally and then to very specific items (Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000). Thus, managing a relative's possessions can sometimes result in the heirs being negatively surprised by a hidden history or personality trait of their parents they were unaware of before clearing the house. Such a discovery enables the bereaved to learn more about the deceased person and, in turn, about their own personality, which may be disturbing at a time of bereavement. It can lead to

negative emotions such as disappointment or even regret at not having been able to share with the deceased some of their skills and achievements.

> While they were in the house, we didn't notice it .... When we were retrieving photos or papers, there were a lot of things I didn't know existed, on the First World War, my grandparents' degree certificates ... I though of my parents as being very well organized, yet when I took it on [clearing their house], it was a complete mess. I was very surprised at not knowing so much about my parents. A feeling that I missed getting to know them better throughout their life. My parents presented an image, a certain side of their personality, and there was a whole area I found out a little about on this occasion. It was disturbing (...) Mother was an education teacher. I came across pending projects ... it was a shame she didn't use her talent, it was disappointing. My father wrote philosophical essays, he never published, he was a Kantian ... which was impressive, but it came to nothing, and I was slightly disappointed at his not having used his talents. It was rather the surprise, the fact that he had never shown me things, and regret too. So, I kept some of these things, but I also threw others away. I was disappointed and upset (Héloïse)

All these emotions are involved, with time and iteratively, in the construction of a link to the deceased and of personal reorganization.

Reconstruction of the relationship to the deceased and his objects and personal reorganization

Death changes the bereaved: they lose their status as children when they lose a parent; as husband when they lose a wife (Richardson 2014); as parent when they lose a child (Kates 2001). The bereaved must rebuild themselves after this event. During this rebuilding stage, it is appropriate to replace "the loss by an inner presence" (Kübler-Ross 1969; Schut et al.

2006), thereby resulting in the redefinition of the relationship to the deceased, to others and to oneself.

The bereaved experience the loss of the loved one by his transformation into a memory, a process that clearly reveals the interpersonal nature of any death (Gentry et al. 1995a; Caserta and Lund 2007). The bereaved sometimes seek to "revive" the deceased. Because they belonged to a loved one, the possessions of the deceased can become and/or remain sacred for bereaved: "possessions of sacred persons become venerated icons because they are contaminated with sacredness" (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989: 6). Emblematic of the deceased's personality and tastes and shared memories (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988), these things – and sometimes for certain bereaved individuals *their* things – may be charged with positive symbolic contamination (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Radford and Bloch 2012), leading the bereaved to enjoy using them, as Francoise does, for example. This respondent "brings to life" the objects of the deceased. She pays attention to what was important to the deceased and keeps alive what was explicit throughout the deceased's life, namely painting.

> Then the clothes, some yes and some not. But yes, I wear them with pleasure, it doesn't bother me. Otherwise the dishes, I use them, jewelry, I wear it ... the paintings are hung, they belonged to mother, she painted them, she loved painting, it's important that people see them, discover them, they [the paintings] may chime with other people's sensibilities ... people should be allowed to talk to each other through painting, the living and the dead (...) books, they are in the library but... they're still hers. I don't know whether they'll ever be mine... Yes, because I saw the thing worn by someone else for years ... well, I appropriate it, but ... it's still not mine. That is, in that it comes from my mother, it's my mother's jewelry, if it comes from her mother, it becomes a family heirloom (Françoise)

During the grief work, questions arise about life and the changes that this passage has allowed the bereaved to experience in relation to themselves (Van Gennep 1960; Kates 2001). One of the changes mentioned by the respondents stemming from clearing the deceased's house concerns the over-consumption of products. Indeed, the bereaved were led to throw things out, sometimes through pique or anger, even if it resulted in waste. These practices can lead to thinking about the role of possessions in their life and make them want to live more simply (Cherrier 2009).

> It's painful because ... well we measure our time on earth. It was at this point that we become aware of the human condition, which is a very small part of the family chain, and we take nothing with us. It puts things into perspective. I lost a child, so already... it changed me, it allows you to go quickly to the basics in life. When you bury your mother, too, you take the measure of things ... I've been through this twice, I'm not the same person in this regard, I don't burden myself with futile things. Recently, we moved, we bought a much smaller house, I feel fine. I told myself, there's no point putting money into all that; everything I threw out, everything my parents had accumulated, it makes me less of a consumer, again this side goes more to what's essential, it makes me less materialistic (Héloïse)

Her experience of grief also led Martine to develop her thinking with regard to the consumption of products and particularly with regard to gifts. A gift reflects the link with others (Sherry 1983). However, when emptying the house of a relative, the bereaved find themselves faced with gifts they gave, which causes them to question the meaning of material consumption.

> When I found things at my grandfather's that I'd given him, I suddenly thought that was ridiculous. It made me think a lot about buying material gifts. In fact, I became aware during this period,

> because after someone's death I find that one thinks a lot. They say that the real gift is spending time with the person, because when they die, you no longer have that opportunity. And these gifts are a bit ridiculous because sooner or later, you find yourself confronted with these things, these gifts, and you don't know what to do. You take them ... but it's weird, because they had been gifts ... and yet you like them because you'd chosen them for someone else. And the worst thing is that sometimes it's too painful and it ends up in the trash. I have completely changed how I give gifts, particularly to my father. Previously, I had no difficulty buying things, for example, a CD, or something for the kitchen...but now I prefer to give my time, a stroll with tea in a nice café and so on (Martine)

Andrée also changed her purchasing habits following the clearance of her mother's house. Although not part of her personal or family culture, she no longer thinks it makes sense buying physical objects (including books) and is turning to collaborative consumption practices (Botsman and Rogers 2010; Belk 2014), including lending things (Jenkins, Molesworth, and Scullion 2014), which she finds more meaningful.

> My mother's books, for example, she had tons of them, no one wanted them and the library refused them. I now know, I'm careful, I no longer buy them ... I threw them out, and it made me feel sick, so I try to do otherwise now, I take them to the library, whereas before I never went there, and I ask my friends for books. I realized that in fact we read the same books, the latest Goncourt [prize winner], etc. So we lend to each other, we pool our book purchases more. Previously, I wasn't conscious of this, now I try to be careful, what's finally the point of buying when the children must take charge of them and throw out them in a few years, it's not even a question of money but it's a matter of common sense for me (Andrée)

The bereavement period is also a time during which people seek meaning in death. With the death of a loved one, it becomes a huge question for themselves, since it is not possible for

them to experience their own death but only that of others. In some cultures ritual calls upon a common language that shapes a social symbolic shared by a group and expressing continuity between the generations (Bonsu and Belk 2003): "We will do for you what was done for your parents and what will be done for your children" (Déchaux 2002: 260). In France, the deritualization of death and bereavement "breaks" this logic of continuity and leads people more to wonder what they will do for future generations and what will be left for them to do. The bereaved question themselves and are ambivalent about what attitude to adopt with regard to their children concerning their possessions. In one respect, they become aware of the burden entailed by clearing a home and think about alleviating this posthumous burden for their children (Marcoux 2001). And at the same time they have trouble conceiving of departing without leaving something of themselves behind.

> I think that clearing the house is a duty, I think it's part of mourning too and grieving. I find that normal. I think it's part of the story. But it's hard, very hard, for the children. What I'd like, when we get old, is to have the courage to separate ourselves from things, so that there's as little as possible when one passes on… anyway, I'm not so much in favor of inheritance and I even think that one shouldn't leave anything apart from capital, and the other day… I was thinking about this and having cleared my mother's house made me think about this question… I was thinking of capital, and if my children like wine, maybe a good cellar. Passing on with a family house, family furniture, the family silver, it's hard I think, and it stops one realizing oneself… Finally I've been asking myself since mom's death… I often change my mind, I'm still not too sure (Françoise)

Different stages characterize the working through of the loss, a process that leads to the reconstruction of a link with the deceased, and rethinking attitudes toward consumption and future generations.

Discussion

In this paper we focus on the attitudes of the bereaved with regard to death and the deceased by examining how they manage the mass of objects accumulated by a deceased person. By mobilizing a theoretical framework of grief (Gentry et al. 1995a, 1995b), we have conceptualized the different stages of the process described by individuals when they have managed the possessions of a deceased relative. In describing the process that underlies these stages, our results enrich understanding of the practices of the bereaved regarding non-transmitted items.

Grieving involves working through the loss of something (a job, a pet, a physical object). With the death of a loved one, grieving is a liminal period during which the bereaved oscillate in their relationship to the deceased between the desire to still be linked to the person, awareness of the loss of this relationship, and the establishment of a different link (Caserta and Lund 2007). Roster (2001) conceptualized a person's separation from an object in a context of voluntary loss. She showed that the decision to get rid of something is the result of an emotional and psychological process of self-dispossession. Echoing the work of Van Gennep (1960), Roster (2001) conceptualizes separation in three stages: detachment from one's former self, liminality (a period of uncertainty), and integration of one's new self. According to her, the context of separation influences the emotional significance of actions and their impact on the owner (Roster 2001). In the present paper we enrich the understanding of this process by showing, in the context of the death of a relative, that the management of the deceased's belongings is characterized by four periods during which the relationship to the deceased and his possessions evolves: (1) *numbness*, which consists of undergoing the first confrontation with the absence of the deceased and is characterized by partial paralysis with regard to his belongings; (2) *yearning*, which consists of seeking the deceased person

and retaining the link with him through his objects; (3) *personal disruption*, which can lead the bereaved to get rid of all the accumulated possessions so as to achieve closure, sometimes accompanied by negative emotions towards the deceased; and (4) *reorganization/reconstruction,* which consists of rethinking the relationship to the deceased, and making sense of his belongings, and more generally of consumption and transmission to future generations.

Our results also allow us to engage in dialogue with the findings of studies that have focused on disposition practices for clearing the house of a relative (Marcoux 2001; Ekerdt, Luborsky and Lysack 2012; Lovatt 2015). These studies present the practices of individuals when managing the accumulated objects of a someone who moves house. Little attention has been paid to the relationships and behaviors of the bereaved regarding the possessions of a *deceased person*, in that managing the objects of an elderly person are different from managing those of a deceased person (Gentry et al. 1995b; Lovatt 2015). Indeed, the management of objects of an elderly person often takes place in his presence: he still has the power to take decisions, and this may "obstruct" the relatives (Marcoux 2001; Ekerdt and Sergeant 2006). In addition, the death of a loved one triggers the working-through of the loss, which is not the case when the person is elderly. The studies have presented the options available for managing the objects of an elderly person and *sometimes* of a deceased (Gentry et al. 1995b; Lovatt 2015), but have not explained why the bereaved behave as they do. These studies take account of the practices of the bereaved statically (Marcoux 2001; Eckerdt and Sergeant 2006; Ekerdt, Luborsky and Lysack 2012). But loss is a dynamic process composed of different periods, during which the bereaved experience different emotions. Deploying the concept of grief and hence the working-through of the loss of the other provides keys for understanding the bereaved's choice of practices with regard to non-transmitted items.

Lovatt (2015) explored people's emotions with regard to the objects of elderly and sometimes deceased persons, whose home needs to be cleared. She shows that people want to respect the deceased by engaging in responsible practices and more specifically by giving the person's possessions to charity shops so that they have a second life. Other outcomes are possible for facilitating separation from objects, such as giving them to artists (Roster 2014). Giving a "safe passage" to objects (Richins 1994), thus allowing them to retain their sources of value, may encourage the bereaved to dispose of objects and view this choice as a mark of respect for the deceased. Our results chime with and complement this research: they take more account of the *negative* emotions of the bereaved toward the deceased inherent in the grieving process (anger, disappointment, vengeance, dejection), which may lead them not *always* to be responsible with respect to the belongings of the deceased and their future life. Indeed, the bereaved may decide to throw them out or destroy them, thereby depriving them of a second life. When emptying the house of a relative, the bereaved may also violate certain personal values, sometimes transmitted by the deceased or by society, pertaining to the environment and avoidance of waste (Prothero and Fitchett 2000; Grønhøj and Thøgersen 2009).

Our study has certain limitations, which in turn open up possibilities for future research. The sample is composed of individuals who have lost a loved one who is a house owner, thus allowing them to empty the house "at their own pace" and to manage their emotions without constraints. While it is not uncommon for people to be home owners at the end of their lives, there are of course cases where they are still – or newly – tenants. In the latter case, because they are constrained by economic reasons, the bereaved must "act quickly" to clear the deceased's living space. This hurried disposal is likely to disrupt the process described in this paper, though without changing its different stages and what it involves. Since grieving is universal (Kübler-Ross 1969), it is very likely that in this case it is delayed, deferred and

managed differently. The question then is: In what ways? In addition our findings reveal the bitterness towards deceased persons who have taken no action with regard clearing their home. Héloïse, for example, was angry with her parents because she had to "do it all". This finding raises questions regarding the concept of generativity (McAdams and de St. Aubin 1992; Urien and Kilbourne 2011). Being generative is acting on behalf of future generations. We may wonder to what extent disposition of one's accumulated belongings in order to lighten the task of future generations enters into the concept of generativity. Finally, it would be interesting to explore the disposal process by changing the unit of analysis from individual bereavement to family bereavement, in other words "the family process that begins with the loss of one of its members" (Shapiro 1996). It would be particularly interesting to look at how family relationships change following inheritance (Bradford 2009) or the clearing of a house, by combining studies that focus on the family (Epp and Price 2008) with those on sibling relationships following a death (Stum 1999) and on inheritance (Miller 2000; Gotman and Laferrère 2006; Hunter 2008; Bradford 2009).

Conclusion

According to Roster (2001; 2014), the disposal process depends on the context. What about this process when the context is highly emotional (i.e. the loss of a loved one)? This study deepens our understanding of the disposal process by revealing how consumers dispose of the belongings of a deceased relative. It shows that this process evolves with the way people experience the loss of the deceased person, i.e. in accordance with the phases of grief. The process is not linear: the length of the phases varies from one individual to another, according to their history and their relationship to the deceased and to the death.

This paper sheds light on consumption markets. It shows the changes that clearing a house following the death of a family member generates with regard to consumption and the

purchase process. Indeed grief is characterized by a redefinition of the relationship to the deceased and other people, but also to oneself (Kübler-Ross 1969; Dreyer 2008). Some bereaved individuals change their relationship to consumption and turn to collaborative consumption (borrowing/loaning things rather than buying them) and/or by purchasing less so as not to accumulate too many objects that future generations will have to manage. Downsizing may be the outcome of individual conscience (Cherrier 2009), but may also follow the death of a relative. Grieving leads them to reconsider how to relate to others, and doing so may include thinking about the role of physical objects and their purchase, particularly gifts.

This paper sheds light on certain aspects of culture. It shows how the deritualization of death and mourning in France (denial of death, privatization of death and the experience of loss) may result in the bereaved having greater difficuly separating themselves from the deceased's belongings. It also shows that the ways of dealing with the deceased's belongings depend on the culture of the family concerned. Our sample is French. Since rituals regarding death and grieving are cultural (Catlin 1993; Bonsu and Belk 2003; Lalande and Bonanno 2006), it would be interesting to compare how the deceased's possessions are managed in other cultures, non-white for example (Burton 2009).

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