

RATIONALIZATION AND ANTIQUE COLLECTING**William A. Pearman, Millersville State College, Pennsylvania****John Schnabel, West Virginia University****Aida K. Tomeh, Bowling Green State University, Ohio****THE PROBLEM**

This paper presents descriptive material gathered from an accidental convenience sample of antique collectors and merchants from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. The data was derived through a large survey instrument. We focus on the process of rationalization as it is applied to the world of antique collecting.

Rationalization as used here refers to an increase in the process of organization or formality. Generally, it captures the movement of antiquing from a fun, pleasurable type of hobby or avocation to something that might approach a more encompassing way of life, perhaps an occupation, or at the least an activity that is no longer pursued for fun as much as it is pursued for profit or competitive purposes.

This report focuses on an examination of indicators of rationalization in antiquing and collecting in terms of the number of years the person has been a collector. Indicators of rationalization include changes in modes, styles, or places of collecting; changes in reasons for collecting and persisting in collecting; progression or development in terms of the category of items collected; and amount of money invested in a collection or the collecting activity.

DATA SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The data was gathered during Spring, 1980 in a larger study designed to determine the history, involvement and rationalization of antique collectors. Three sociologists distributed self-administered questionnaires to antique collectors, collectors of popular culture collectables and antique dealers at flea markets, antique shows and antique shops. Sampling was based on available respondents when the data were collected.

About 56 percent have college training; 44 percent have high school training; 31 percent are professionals or semi-professionals; 27 percent are clerical, skilled or semi-skilled workers; 28 percent are housewives or retirees; and 14 percent are antique dealers: 59 percent are females, 41 percent are males; 33

percent are between 20 and 35 years of age, 31 percent are between 36 and 50 years old and 36 percent are over 51; 69 percent are married and 31 percent are single, divorced, separated, or widowed.

BACKGROUND

Most studies on the process of rationalization, as applied to large scale formal organizations follow in the tradition of Max Weber (1946) or Parsons (1974) re: Weber and analysis of the concept of bureaucracy. Fewer deal with small scale organization and almost none deal with the looser forms of social organization addressed here.

Austin and Tobin (1977) presented an analysis of the structure and organization of flea markets as a workplace. They used interviews, and participant and non-participant observation. They suggest that flea markets are not the disorganized carnival-like situation as they appear. They note that rational elements are present in terms of dealers' approaches to their customers and their motives for persisting in flea market dealing. Flea market dealers grow personally and intellectually in their collecting activity. Austin and Tobin also suggest that flea marketing is one path of entrance into the more sophisticated marketplaces that comprise the world of antique collecting.

Antiques can be collected by many methods. Some collecting methods will be defined by sociologists as legitimate methods of work; other methods will be dismissed as play, leisure, or some form of nonwork. Sociologists of work should consider seriously the alternative movements and communities that surround them; these movements and communities are part of the world that sociologists seek to understand and explain (Miller 1980). Certainly, antique collecting is a form of social behavior and the social construction that surrounds it is part of the phenomenon that Miller encourages sociologists to probe more deeply. Collectors are a source for comparative analysis of occupations. To understand how forms of work that some consider leisure resemble or differ from firms considered work

will enhance our understanding of both activities.

Although it may begin as a hobby or an avocation, collecting whether of antiques or popular new vintage items such as baseball cards, 45 RPM records, or political posters and campaign buttons can have certain long-term benefits. For example, Stebbins (1979, 1980a, 1980b) indicates that commitments and costs can escalate remarkably fast for leisure enthusiasts, and sometimes so fast that the amateur is indistinguishable from the professional.

Dannefer (1980) applies the concepts of rationality and passion in an analysis of the social world of old car collectors. Dannefer states "collecting may be pursued impulsively, some arbitrary logic may be imposed on the project . . . specific collecting goals have the function of ordering a potentially chaotic activity and thus of rationalizing something that is fun."

ANALYSIS

Of the 154 replies analyzed for this report, 148 provided useful information as to number of years that individuals have engaged in collecting. The modal category was 6-10 years collecting; the median category was 11-15 years. The study covered a representative time span. Persons who collected less than 5 years constituted 16% of the sample; 76 percent had collected from 6 to 35 years, and 8% of the sample had collected for more than 35 years.

Home auctions and private sales were the most popular ways of collecting. Each was cited by 21% of the respondents. Flea markets were the third most popular place of collection, mentioned by 19% of the respondents.

A question that bears on rationalization is, do collectors change their modes of collecting over time? Do they move from less structured ways of collecting to a reliance on more formal-organized mechanisms over time?

Respondents were provided with a number of response categories as to favorite ways to collect. These included home auctions, auction houses, flea markets, shows, shops, private sales, and other. The first three categories were considered to be less formal in that they allow abundant opportunities for haggling over price and although some may follow rather prescribed rules, they usually

take place in more informal settings characterized by a sense of lessened personal commitment.

For persons collecting from 1-5 years, 36% said flea markets were their favorite way to collect. The less formal categories of flea markets, home auctions, and auction houses were cited by 52 percent of these respondents.

When we examine the responses of persons who report collecting between 6 and 10 years, a different configuration emerges. Their favorite way of collecting is private sales. This mode is mentioned by 27 percent of the respondents. Private sales tend to generate more of a trust-commitment relationship between buyer and seller than flea market auction house settings do. For one thing, one must often be known or accepted as a collector to be invited to a private sale. Also, in a private sale, the nature of the relationship is more narrowly circumscribed and certain face-to-face social mechanisms come into play. Among the groups who reported collecting between 6-10 years, flea markets were the third favorite choice as a way to collect. This response was given by 18 percent of the respondents in the 6-10 year category.

Persons who reported collecting between 11-15 years, selected home auctions as their favorite way to collect in 42 percent of the cases. Thus, we continue to see a move away from flea markets as the favorite place for collecting, but this does not mean that flea markets lose popularity. They seem to continue as a haunt for the collector, even if they lose their appeal as the favorite place/method to collect.

Both private sales and flea markets are the favorite way to collect among persons who report collecting between 16-20 years. Until this point, the percent of persons who report flea markets as their favorite way to collect had decreased with each successive cohort of collectors. This might reinforce social psychological principles of canalization or reliance on first satisfying response. However, this notion is not supported by succeeding cohorts who have been collecting 21-25 years, 26-30 years, or 31-35 years. Here the percent who favor flea markets is 15.4, 0, and 0 respectively. The less rational collection methods drop in favor of these categories. Thus, flea markets drop from the most favorite way of collecting or being cited by 36 percent of respon-

dents among persons who have collected from 1-5 years to being cited by none of the respondents at 26-30 years of collecting.

Somewhat paradoxically, flea markets reemerge as the second most favorite collection device among those collecting for 36 years or longer. This group relied more on "other" ways to collect. For example, one respondent reported that he had moved into the area of estate appraisal and now acquired antiques and collectibles by being the first one to view an estate and offer to buy items of special appeal. The long time collectors often lamented changes that have taken place in the "field". Many decried the movement away from what they considered collecting of true or real antiques to the so-called popular collectibles that might be of antique vintage. They often added remarks of lack of commitment, lack of appreciation of art or workmanship, or lack of historical significance, among the younger collectors.

If rationalization increased with time spent as a collector, we should expect to see changes in response to the questions that are reasons for collecting. An indication of the process of rationalization or formalization might be a move away from fun or pleasure as a motivation for collecting to an emphasis on economic rewards or development of an appreciation for antiquity.

An analysis of the variable, number of years as a collector cross-classified with reasons for collecting indicates that beginning collectors are most interested in fun and pleasure, which persists as a reason for collecting over time as shown.

A more rational or formal reason, for money or investment purposes, does not increase with years involved in collecting. As a matter of fact, this response might explain why people become involved or interested in collecting to begin with. This response is given by 23 percent of those collecting for ten years or less. It decreases later.

The response "to pass away time" receives little endorsement except among those collecting from twenty-six to thirty years. It decreased after that. See Table 1.

The motive "to pass away time" increased with time spent collecting, but we must remember that generally with increased years in collecting we are also talking about older persons

who may no longer have a regular occupation and thus have more time on their hands. Money investment drops as a reason in the middle range of years, but it gains again as a reason among persisters. In comparing the newer collectors to those collecting for longer time periods, we notice loss of interest in collecting items because old things hold and appeal or are important. This may be a sign of loss of emotional involvement, but these individuals do not appear to move toward more formal rational motivations.

TABLE 1: MOTIVE FOR COLLECTING BY YEARS' COLLECTING (Percentage)

<i>Primary Motive</i>	Years:	1-10	11-25	26 +
Fun, pleasure		60	62	50
Money, investment		24	11	16
Pass away time		1	5	28
Old things important		15	22	6
(N)		(68)	(45)	(32)

TABLE 2: CHANGE IN INTEREST BY YEARS COLLECTING (Percentages)

<i>Changed Focus</i>	Years:	1-10	11-25	26 +
Yes		56	52	29
No		44	48	71
(N)		(68)	(48)	(31)

A change in items collected might be a indication of growth or broadening of interests or development within one particular field of collecting. For example, one interviewee traced his development from interest in old radios, to interest in old television sets, to interest in collecting only specific parts of old television sets. Another progressed from collecting dolls, to collecting dolls with china faces, to collecting dolls by a specific maker in a specific time period. Still others reported very diverse interest shifts. For example, from furniture, to china, to tin boxes.

The data does not provide enough information to show whether it is change for the sake of change, or a change that represents growth and/or development in collecting either generally or specifically.

Table 2 presents a composite of years spent collecting by whether individuals have changed the focus of their collection.

A final indicator of rationalization was the amount of money invested in collection over time. This variable supports the development of rationalization. Among beginners or collectors of five years or less, 50% of the respondents were investing \$250 or less in their collecting annually, but by the time they were collecting for more than ten years, 50% were investing the \$1,750 or more annually.

SUMMARY

Evidence for a process of increased rationalization among antiquers and collectors is mixed. The question calls for further investigation with a more refined measuring instrument and stricter sample selection.

Some of the findings noted here are: collectors appear to move away from early less formal methods of collection such as flea markets over time. They search for new settings in which they hope to acquire their treasures. The new settings are not necessarily in the direction of more formal or rational means of collecting. The motivation of fun or pleasure persists over time; there is not necessarily an increase in the profit motivation as people persist in collecting. It is suggested that profit might better explain why people become involved in antiquing rather than their development in it. We know that collectors change in terms of the nature of their collection over time. For some this represents development within a specific category of collecting, for others, the change is to a completely new or different type of item. Finally, formal rationality seems to occur in that collectors invest more in their collection over time.

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