

## TRAVELERS AS COLLECTORS, COLLECTORS AS TRAVELERS

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Recently I read a message on Facebook from someone who said he has now been to ninety countries and was hoping to reach one hundred countries in the near future. I can also recall conversations I've had on my travel with travelers who told me they had been to six continents and were going to visit a seventh soon. Their goal was to have been to all seven continents.

These conversations made me think about travel in a new way. We know that there are many reasons why people travel—such as to have new experiences, to see interesting and beautiful places, and to get away from their routines and the crush of everyday life. So tourism marketers have designed their advertising campaigns to resonate with these aspects of travel. But what about trying to appeal to the collector mentality in people? That seems to me to be a neglected area.

What, we may ask, are the components of what we might call the collector personality? What motivates people to become collectors of whatever they collect: Tibetan scrolls, seashells, erasers, comic books, sexual partners, classic automobiles, or cities, beautiful places, or countries that they have visited.

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There more certainly is an element of pleasure in obtaining examples of whatever collectors are collecting. One of my grandsons is a collector and he told me, recently, of how much pleasure he got from a box of seashells we sent him. He went over every shell carefully and sent us an email saying he has almost all the shells he's looking for.

One thing collectors want is completeness...to have as many, if not all, of good if not the best specimens of whatever it is they are collecting. Some people derive pleasure from collecting, realizing they can never will get all of whatever it is they collect. Collecting for them is a quest that, in curious ways, gives some purpose to their lives. Some people collect things because they think they can eventually make money from their collections. Children who collected comic books when they were young and during their adolescence may have collections worth a great deal of money.

That's because collectors are willing to spend money for things they want.

So some collectors, we may say, make money from other collectors. Collecting may be a way of fighting off the strictures of the superego in the service of id functions—a desire for things, or in the case of travelers, experiences. People who are collectors want to have many things, but by being, a collector disguises their lust for acquisitions by papering it over with a coating of fastidiousness and expertise. If you collect thimbles (which, I discovered, are a very popular collector's item) it won't cost you very much, but if you collect classic automobiles, it can be very expensive. Some people incur great debts to obtain items they feel they need to complete their collections. Sometimes marriages fail because of the zeal of a collector. Some collectors, as the result of the number of divorces in many countries, collect new wives and husbands, one after the other.

Freudians would suggest that the collector mentality stems from infancy when, at certain times, infants desire to hold onto their feces. It then manifests itself in the momentous battle in western countries between children and their parents known as toilet training. Most children eventually overcome this fixation, but this residue from infancy, what Freud called the "anal retentive" stage, lodged in the unconscious, may be at work on collectors of all ages who never resolved their anal-retentive desires. For some, in curious ways, their sense of loss of what went into the toilet and was flushed away, leads them to try to make up for their losses

as infants and children. Freud, himself, it turns out, was a collector of oriental rugs.

If many travelers are motivated, unconsciously of course, by the collector mentality, advertisers should find ways to appeal to this dimension of their personalities. They must find some way, subtly, of touching this “I’m a collector” responsive chord in travelers. The product advertisers are selling is not only places but places that enhance the feelings of a collector that this place is a valuable “part” of the collection—going to Antarctica or Tibet or Bali or wherever—is important and will enhance the collector’s desire for completeness.

What travel marketers have missed, I would suggest, is recognizing what many traveler collectors feel they are missing—the right place to complete the collection of important places to visit, that will enhance their feeling of wellbeing and their status as a collector of the best places. Matthew Arnold talked about knowing “the best that has been thought and said.” We can add to this, the best places to have visited.

For some traveler collectors, numbers count. And if a traveler collector has been to one hundred countries, that is quite an accomplishment. For other traveler collectors, going to the right places is crucial, so one’s collection of places visited is as important as the number of places visited. In the course of my travels, I had occasion to lecture on some cruise ships where I met people who told me, proudly, that they have been on seventy cruises. I could describe this as an example travel collector connoisseurship, with the emphasis here on ships.

Mary Douglas (1978), an English social anthropologist, developed a theory she described as grid-group theory. It argues that everyone in modern societies belongs to groups with either few or many rules, which she called grid, and weak or strong boundaries, which she called group. So we can have strong boundaries and many rules, strong boundaries and few rules, weak boundaries and many rules, or weak boundaries and few rules. This leads, then, to four social groups or lifestyles in all societies, which we can describe as elitists, individualists, egalitarians and fatalists.

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				Group Boundaries	
		<u>Weak</u>		<u>Strong</u>	
Rules	<u>Many</u>		Fatalists		Elitists
	<u>Few</u>		Individualists		Egalitarians

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Figure 1. *Grid-group cultural model*

Everyone, Douglas argues, belongs to one of these four groups, even though they may not recognize the fact. Her point is that it is membership in these lifestyles that shapes our behavior. In her article “In Defence of Shopping” in Pasic Falk and Colin Campbell’s *The Shopping Experience* (London: Sage) she writes (1999: 17):

We have to make a radical shift from thinking about consumption as a manifestation of individual choice. Culture itself is the result of myriads of individual choices, not primarily between commodities but between kinds of relationships. The basic choice that a rational individual has to make is the choice of what kind of society to live in. According to that choice, the rest follows. *Artefacts* are selected to demonstrate the choice. Food is eaten, clothes are worn, cinema, books, music, *holidays*, all the rest are choices that conform with the initial choice for a form of society.

What is crucial, she argues, is the lifestyle with which we identify, even though we are not conscious of being a member of a given lifestyle.

Her theory is important, for our purposes, because it helps us understand why people collect certain things. Collecting, if Douglas is correct, is also not a manifestation of individual choice. People who are elitists collect different things from people who are egalitarians. And elitist travelers, out to collect experiences of the right places, tend to visit places where they hope they won’t encounter egalitarians, individualists, and fatalists, who are collecting different kinds of places and experiences that are congruent with their values and beliefs. And income. All four groups are in conflict with one another but need one another to survive.

All collectors, if the Freudians are correct, are ultimately motivated by their childhood experiences and the psychic trauma of their infancies, when so much of their precious poop was dumped into the toilet. They spend their lives as collectors making up for their tragic losses and, when they are travelers, searching for reparational experiences. The child is not only the father of the man, but also of the traveler.

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