

# The Storied Life of Singularized Objects: Forces of Agency and Network Transformation

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Our study contributes to understanding the role of material culture in families. Findings from a longitudinal case study extend Kopytoff's theory of singularization by explaining what occurs between the singularization of a focal object and its recommodification. We uncover processes that move an already singularized object in and out of a network of practices, objects, and spaces; identify forces that constrain and empower a singularized object's agency within that network; and demonstrate network transformations that result from the focal object's movement. This extension explains some paradoxical findings in consumer research: how objects are granted agency even while displaced, when irreplaceable objects can be replaced, and why families sometimes displace central identity practices.

As Megan and Reece Erikson prepare to move with their four daughters to Reece's childhood home, they envision the kinds of activities that will fill each of the spaces in their new home. In doing so, they think about how to arrange their furnishings in support of these activities. During the move, pieces are brought from the old house, inherited from other family members, left behind by Reece's parents, and purchased from nearby stores. Each piece arrives replete with transformative potentialities and eventually becomes integrated into a network of family practices, objects, and spaces that are co-constitutive of the Erikson's lives and the hopes and fears for who they are and may become. One of the Erikson's most beloved possessions is their 13-foot kitchen table, central both to their everyday practices of "doing family" and to their more sacred celebrations. Given the table's size and history, it is difficult to

find the right place for it among the other objects vying for space. The Eriksons are intentional in their choosing—being careful to ensure that there is a space for the girls to dance and tumble while reserving special areas for family meals—but in their intentionality, they also are neglectful. They overlook how much they love to read at the kitchen table or take on massive art projects that last for days. The resulting arrangement transforms centrally held family practices, alters the meanings and uses of spaces, and shapes the stories of each object at play. (Interview data)

Consumer research examines how we choose objects, bring them into our lives, and give them personal meanings that may strip them of commodity status (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Grayson and Shulman 2000; Miller 1987). Researchers also focus on the movement of objects as they are returned to the market sphere and recommodified or discarded (Hermann 1997; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Sherry 1990). Igor Kopytoff (1986) explains this macro process using the concept of the cultural biography of things that tracks an object's origin, exchanges, uses, and transition points. His work highlights the point when the object enters the home and becomes singularized (given personal meanings; Miller 1987) and the point when the object exits the home and is recommodified. Over the biography of an object, this process can happen many times as the object is singularized within different households. Our study offers an extension of Kopytoff's theory, focused on the transformations of the singularized object between the period when it enters the home and when it is recommodified. Both im-

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plicitly and explicitly, consumer research assumes that as long as an object remains important it will be protected from recommodification. However, as the opening epigraph describes, changes in family circumstances threaten even valued objects with displacement. Why do some cherished objects end up in storage while others retain an active role in our lives? Kopytoff's theory of singularization falls short of answering this question.

In order to address this theoretical gap, our article investigates the biography of a singularized household object over time as it interacts with and transforms a network composed of the focal object, family practices, spaces, and other objects. We advance three primary research questions. First, what processes move a singularized object in and out of a network? We know that disruptions and transitions can threaten to displace a valued object, but we know little about the processes that unfold while the valued object is held by the family, that is, between periods of singularization and recommodification. Second, what forces constrain and empower an already singularized object's agency within domestic practices of materiality? Prior research does not explain the range of conditions under which networks propel objects into families' daily activities, isolate them into storage, or even displace them to the marketplace. Third, how does the movement of a singularized object in and out of a network transform it (family identity practices, other singularized objects, and spaces)? We posit that the movement of a singularized object is consequential, with the potential to alter the flow of daily life. For consumer researchers, these research questions have implications for previous work on person-object relations, challenging us to reconsider the properties of object irreplaceability, the conditions of object agency, and the commitment to family identity practices. To position our research, we next unfold the relevant literatures that ground our perspectives and assumptions and point to the limitations of these that prompted our specific research questions.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

For an organizing framework, we turn to Kopytoff's (1986) concept of the cultural biography of things. He contends that objects, defined as nonhuman active social entities (Latour 1993; Preda 1999), accumulate histories from the social interactions they are caught up in, ranging across marketplace and nonmarketplace contexts (Geary 1986): "An eventful biography of a thing becomes a story of the various singularizations of it" (Kopytoff 1986, 90). Singularization, sometimes described as appropriation processes, refers to how consumers personalize and integrate objects into their lives (Miller 1987). Decommodification rituals are a prominent example in consumer research (Coupland 2005; Rook 1985; Sherry and McGrath 1989). This is how consumers produce use-value and bring contingent order to the universe of things surrounding them (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Miller 1987). Singularization processes frequently oppose the valuation processes in the commodity sphere that dissolve object significations into exchange value

(Belk et al. 1989; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Kopytoff 1986; Simmel 1900/2004; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988).

Consumer culture research has examined extensively how consumers can singularize commodities and use them in purposive identity work (Arnould and Thompson 2005) and how consumers can return these objects to the commodity sphere when contexts or identities shift (Hermann 1997; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000). This research also has touched upon the roles of liminal spaces such as attics, basements, and storage rooms in object biographies (Korosec-Serfaty 1984). For example, consumers use pantries to transform branded commodities into singularized actors in family narratives (Coupland 2005), while living rooms (or salons) often "warm" objects to create "homey" domestic environments and project an image of family (Costa 1989; Hurdley 2006; McCracken 1989; Money 2007). By contrast, attics and basements are used to "cool" objects hot with singularized meanings prior to an intended return to the commodity sphere (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005). Research also has examined informal transactions between consumers at sites such as garage sales, flea markets, and on-line trading forums in decommodification and recommodification processes (Giesler 2006; Hermann 1997; Sherry 1990). Despite such advances, prior research on person-object relations lacks a longitudinal perspective that would illuminate objects' movements and transformations within the decommodified sphere. In response to calls to take a "long view" of the flow of objects in relationships (Douglas 1994), our research presents a dynamic cultural biography of an object as it interacts with a family.

In addition to examining the biographies of single objects, Kopytoff (1986), among other scholars, highlights the interplay of object-person biographies: "The central idea is that, as people and objects gather time, movement, and change, they are constantly transformed, and these transformations of person and object are tied up with each other" (Gosden and Marshall 1999, 169; see also Belk 1992). Further, researchers observe that material "practices have a trajectory or path of development, a history" (Warde 2005, 139), and thus, we can examine the biographies of specific practices in which objects are implicated as well. More broadly, it makes sense to consider how the biographies that support networks of objects, persons, and practices might interplay with one another. Consistent with our conception of networks, researchers have examined object collections (Belk 1995), persons, and practices co-constitution in a scientific lab (Knorr Cetina 1992; Latour 1988), a complex transportation system (Latour 1996), or a common household freezer embedded in kitchen practices (Guillou and Guibert 1989; Hand and Shove 2007), where each entity depends upon the others for definition. The objects and persons that constitute a particular network engage in joint processes of knowledge creation, responding to and affecting one another (Miller 2005; Preda 1999). This is sometimes referred to as "the dance of agency" (Pickering 1995) because objects become active as they are caught up in these

processes and constitute a network of practice and meaning (21). To clarify our view of object agency for the purposes of this study, we assume not that objects demonstrate purposeful intention but rather that objects are active, or mobilized as part of a network and nested in a set of practices that may be intentional or embedded in the habitus of everyday life (Bourdieu 1977; Latour 1999). Our contention is that Kopytoff's theory of singularization is limited by his failure to directly consider the role of object agency. Just as the historicity of a home can impose constraints to action (Miller 2001), we suggest that the forces that empower and constrain an object's agency—activated by the interplay of identity practices, objects, and spaces—are consequential for the biographies of singularized objects.

We select the family as the small social structure within which to examine the possible transformations of network entities. In contemporary consumer culture, object biographies depict multiple clashing and uncertain trajectories (Hurdley 2006; Kopytoff 1986), and the same is true of personal biographies, as evidenced in diverse identity practices (Ahuvia 2005; Reed and Bolton 2005; Warde 2005). Our study examines what a network becomes, including possible transformations of object biographies, spaces, and family identity practices such as those described in the opening epigraph. Although family identity practices can be idiosyncratic, prominent examples include rituals, recurrently told family stories, social dramas that redress norm violations, intergenerational transfers, and shared routines, such as family game night, television viewing, or co-shopping (Epp and Price 2008; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

Family identity refers to a family's structure, intergenerational orientation, and character (Epp and Price 2008), reflecting the qualities that "make it a particular family and that differentiate it from other families" (Bennett, Wolin, and McAvity 1988, 212). Some work identifies a link between objects and families' identities (Belk 1988; Curasi et al. 2004; McCracken 1989; Mehta and Belk 1991; Price et al. 2000). The object-family identity link is dramatic in heirloom research. Generations of family legitimate heirlooms as vehicles for group identity through practices such as storytelling, ritual use, and display (Curasi et al. 2004; McCracken 1989). This research also hints at tensions between individual and family identities; family heirlooms may be distasteful to and constraining for the designated curator or passed down only through obligation (Curasi et al. 2004). Others, too, have observed that objects linked to relationships may oppress and constrain (Marcoux 2001; Miller 2001, 2005). However, this research only signals the existence of families' collective identity practices—and also relational and individual identity practices within families—but it rarely investigates how the latter complement and compete with those of the collective (Epp and Price 2008). A network approach allows us to examine these intersections as they have an impact on object agency.

Some object-family research examines how consumers decommodify, singularize, and personalize objects such that they become irreplaceable, priceless, and/or inalien-

able (Belk 1991; Curasi et al. 2004; Grayson and Shulman 2000). Consumers often view indexical objects as irreplaceable due to their ability to "verify important moments of personal history" (Grayson and Shulman 2000, 19). Indexical signs are those that have factual associations with experiences or people (Peirce 1867–1914/1940). Objects with iconic cues are "perceived as being similar to something else" (Grayson and Martinec 2004, 298), those that have sensual associations with experiences or people (Peirce 1867–1914/1940). Prior research shows that both indexicality and iconicity figure in singularization processes and identity practices. It is argued that object durability and physicality, longevity of the relation between persons and objects, the passage of time, and the overarching value system of the small group drive these singularization processes (Belk 1988; Curasi et al. 2004; Kopytoff 1986; McCracken 1989; Miller 1987). But this research implies that objects are irreplaceable to the extent that they retain indexical or iconic associations. Our research suggests that this is not so; instead it demonstrates that objects can be replaced even when indexical or iconic associations persist.

We narrowed our study to an investigation within a family's home, where many possible biographies of objects, persons, and practices emerge. A growing social science literature focuses on domestic space as a context to explore the nature of "relationships between people and material culture" (Money 2007, 357). Perhaps the prototype for this work was Bourdieu's (1979) study of the axiology of the Kabyle house form in Algeria. Some research recognizes that the evolution of cultural values is embodied in homes and furnishings (Miller 2001; Wilk 1989). In this work, furnishings and décor also may contain memories or symbolize lineage (Chevalier 1999; Curasi et al. 2004; Money 2007). Surprisingly, there is little attention to object biography in this research. Some research focuses on individuals' identity work with regard to the house and its furnishings (Garvey 2001; Hurdley 2006; Miller 2008). That is, "by constructing narratives around visual productions in the apparently private space of the home, people participate in the ongoing accomplishment of social, moral identities" (Hurdley 2006, 718). A small amount of this work recognizes a family unit, rather than individuals, involved in identity work (Chevalier 1999; Miller 2008; Money 2007; Tan 2001), but rarely is the evolution of this unit over time or its dynamic interaction with object biographies a focus of investigation, as it is in this study.

We summarize several theoretical and empirical gaps across the literatures reviewed above that merit further investigation. First, previous research does not explain the movements of objects from active to displaced, specifically those that informants claim are central to identity practices, possess indexical associations, or are considered irreplaceable. In other words, it does not account for the conditions under which irreplaceable objects can be replaced. In parallel, previous studies do not account for why families might displace central identity practices related to these objects. Second, prior studies do not explain under what conditions

displaced objects—that is, those objects that are seemingly moved outside of taken-for-granted networks (such as into storage)—return to agentic roles in identity practices. Third, this work does not address potential transformations of objects or envisioned family biographies. Considering the interplay of the biographies of objects, persons, and practices, a myriad of possible transformations may surface in any particular context. Despite this, neither Kopytoff nor his successors have considered potential trajectories of an already singularized object that never actually materialize. Thus, we do not understand why certain network transformations occur within a domestic space while others do not or the related outcomes for both objects and families.

## METHOD

We conducted a two-year case study that tracks the biography of the Erikson (a pseudonym) family's kitchen table as linked to a network of other objects, identity practices, and spaces. Using a life-history approach (Denzin 1978), we conducted multiple interviews with five family members, including the mother, the father, two children, and the mother's mother (McCracken 1988b). We uncover how contextual shifts and networks of object, spatial, and practice biographies propel and alter the uses of the table and how the table in turn alters key family identity practices.

We produce depth of understanding and triangulation across informants and events by drawing on multiple family members and collecting data at multiple time points (Wallerstein and Belk 1989; Yin 2003). Interviews took place first in April 2005 and again in April 2007. In-home research typically reduces informant reactivity and provides opportunities for display of artifacts, demonstration of processes, and auto-driving (Heisley and Levy 1991). Over the two-year period, the first author made multiple visits to the family's home, conducted in situ interviews, and photographed the table in various roles. We performed member checks to ensure the accounts resonated with family members' lived experiences. Between the first set of interviews and the second set of interviews, the family moved to a new house, making identity issues salient (Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997; Schouten 1991) and allowing us to assess contextual changes as they unfolded that challenged the biographies of both the family and the object and offered new potential network transformations.

Following Strauss and Corbin (1990), after holistic review of each transcript, we began data analysis with open and axial coding. Procedures focused on two levels of analysis. We first looked within transcripts to understand how each participant characterized family identity practices and relations to materiality. Then we looked across transcripts to compare participants' perspectives and develop thematic understanding that accounted for all of the data. We moved back and forth between the themes and the data to compare subsequently analyzed data with the existing thematic categories to detect similarity and difference. In the case of recurrent differences, we constructed new themes (Strauss and Corbin 1990). This type of analysis is an iterative process

that required moving between theory and data (Spiggle 1994).

We offer a few caveats to place boundary conditions on our findings. As the family at the heart of our case study differs from other families in many ways, of course, we do not make any claims to generalizability of the empirical results but instead insist on their theoretical perspicacity (Stewart 1998). One caveat with regard to our findings is that this family is quite intentional about producing identity practices, and thus it is unlike families in which a lack of intentionality and tactical engagement creates a barrier to realizing identity goals (Oyserman et al. 2004). However, we postulate that reflective family identity work may be more common than is sometimes thought. Further, we only focus on a small part of this family's personal, family, and object biographies. Sordid and dysfunctional elements on both sides of the families of origin have affected the flow of objects as well. Moreover, the focus on the domestic space and the objects chosen excludes attention to other potentially provocative sites of identity practice, such as family vacations (Löfgren 1999). Space limitations do not allow us to expand upon these elements of the story. In addition, we did not engage in prolonged systematic participant observation; instead we collected data through immersion with the family at different points in time. As a result, the data do not provide a continuous record of identity practices and object engagements, a common problem in longitudinal case studies (Geertz 1995). However, this does not detract from our ability to generate theoretical insight as we establish variability in the construct by sampling across three diverse contexts (the mother's family-of-origin home, the focal family's original home, and the focal family's new home/dad's family-of-origin home), tracking seven different objects (focal object, Bea's table, foosball table, temporary kitchen table, early marriage table, basketball game, and disposable table) and collecting data prior to and after threats to focal object displacement (move, reincorporation attempts).

## ERIKSON FAMILY IDENTITY

We describe the Erikson family identity using three components: generational orientation, structure, and character (Epp and Price 2008). These elements situate the family in relation to others and frame the discussion of the case.

### Generational Orientation

The Erikson family is embedded within a rural Midwestern cultural context in which farming ways of life form the background. It is not uncommon for family members to move away from and back to an inherited farm as do the Eriksons in this study. Family figures strongly as a value, as a source of pride, and as an economic and social resource. Early marriage and childbearing are generally considered prosocial behaviors. Preservation of family patrimony, traditions of self-reliance, and practices of frugality form the taken-for-granted ethos of everyday life (Arnould et al. 2004; Curasi, Arnould, and Price 2007). Further, both within

and outside the context of the interviews, the Erikson family explains their current family values and practices as linked to the Midwestern cultural context and to their own families of origin.

### Structure

The Erikson family consists of Reece, a 36-year-old farmer; Megan, a 37-year-old homemaker; and the family's four daughters, Samantha, Meg, Lindsay, and Jessica, ages 10, 9, 6, and 4, respectively, at the time of the initial interview, of whom Samantha and Meg were interviewed. In this family, Reece is viewed as the head of the household. Although all family members are encouraged to voice their opinions, the family most often defers to Reece as the final authority. Further, parents present themselves as a unified voice with regard to discipline and decision making. Megan's mother, Joanna, who was in her early sixties, also participated in the study. Joanna lives in another state and served as the original procurer and curator of the kitchen table.

### Character

Family members expressed similar descriptors to characterize the Erikson family identity. These included both articulated family values and distinctive family practices. One of the family's most entrenched values is its strong Christian faith ("We forgive each other and give each other grace"), which permeates how they assign meaning to objects and practices, behave in public and in private, and make decisions in their everyday lives. In comparison to other families, the Eriksons underscore the importance of clear boundaries around their family and protection from outside influences that may conflict with the family's values and beliefs ("The outside will beat you up; school will beat you up; but you come home and it is safe"). For instance, the children were home-schooled (until recently—prior to the first set of interviews for this study) and are shielded carefully from television as well as from access to other forms of popular culture that Reece and Megan feel may have a corruptive influence. Instead, the family selectively chooses activities that reinforce existing values.

Despite these protective boundaries, the Eriksons are socially engaged. They frequently entertain neighbors, friends, and family at their home ("back-to-school coffee," birthday parties, bridal/baby showers) and actively participate in their community (church, dance, exercise classes, sports, and educational programs). In fact, it is not uncommon to meet members of the community from various walks of life who have frequently interacted with the Erikson family, especially Megan, who enjoys a reputation for hospitality and inclusivity.

The Eriksons treat being a large family as a badge of honor, describing their family as "larger than life." This extends beyond the immediate family as Megan comments on the significance of growing up in a large family and her desire to replicate this in her own family. Throughout the

study, the Eriksons likened themselves to an army. This descriptor encompasses many previously discussed aspects of the Erikson family identity, including its size, protective character, and articulated values.

The Erikson family also is defined in its enthusiasm ("Fun is a big priority in our family") and drama ("We always act stuff out"). The family has a specific worldview that privileges some family practices, such as doing crafts/projects, entertaining guests, having family dinner, telling stories, verbalizing blessings, and dancing/acting out plays (siblings design and perform; parents are active/engaged audience members). The Erikson family is about activity (even at the dinner table)—a gathering place must be a place of activity. For instance, storytelling involves jumping out of one's seat and acting out the scene, which includes dramatic gestures, voices, and facial expressions. Elements of family identity and ascriptions of values and beliefs described above are detailed, nuanced, and resurface throughout the discussion of findings below.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDY FINDINGS

Every piece has a story. . . . If it [the table] could talk, you know we'd be here for hours taking notes. (Megan)

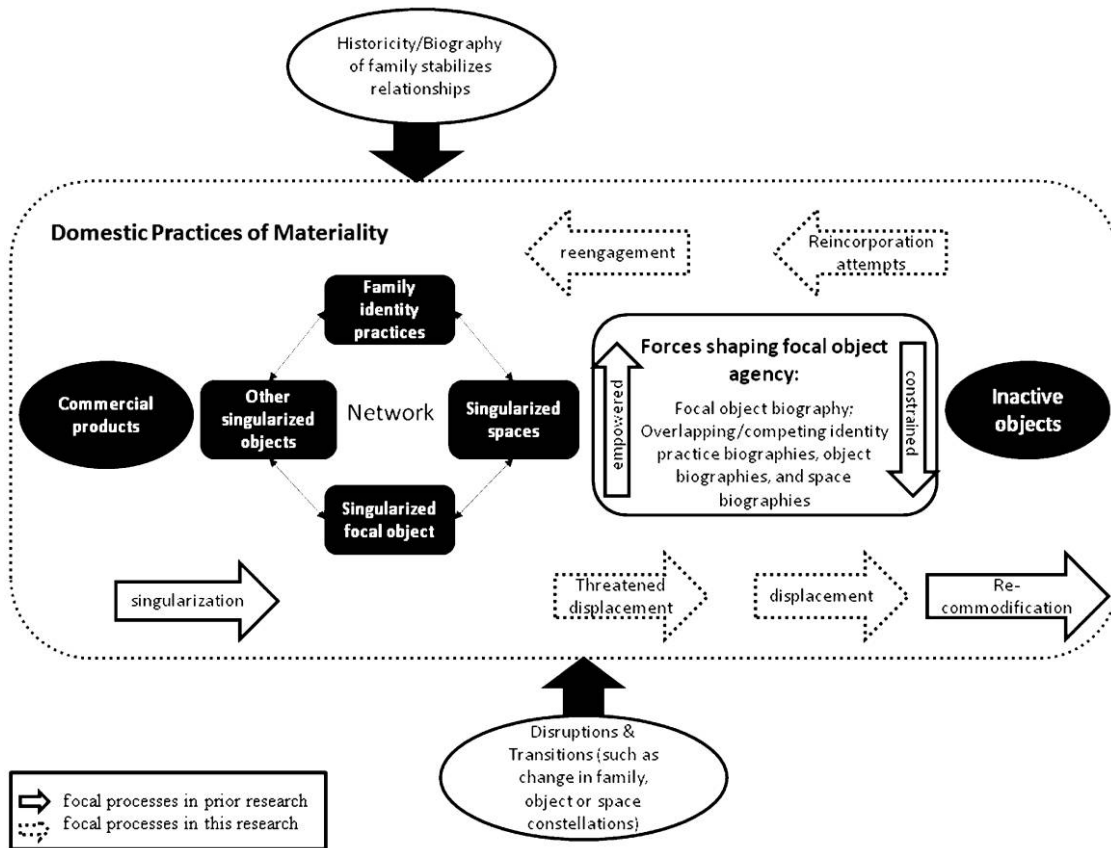
If tables could talk, it could tell . . . a lot. (Samantha)

Before providing the details of the case, we introduce a theoretical framework to help the reader detect key points as the case unfolds. Figure 1 outlines four key processes of object movement and network transformation that illuminate what occurs between singularization and recommodification: threatened displacement, displacement, reincorporation, and reengagement.

As the figure depicts, families bring commercial products into the domestic space. Some of these objects become singularized (imbued with meaning and use) and caught up in networks of existing spaces, objects, and identity practices that implicate the object. We refer to this as the "network" in figure 1. When an object is caught up in the network, it is *active*; individuals, relational units, and/or the collective enlist the object, such as a table, in identity practices.

We know that disruptions such as changes in family, introductions of new objects, and remodeling of spaces frequently occur, and during these periods, a singularized focal object may be threatened with displacement from the network. The object is *inactive* and displaced when it is not directly enlisted in the network. Figure 1 distinguishes our findings from prior research to show where the focus of our attention is—how forces threaten the displacement of singularized objects from out of a network and how the singularized object is empowered or constrained in the context of these domestic practices of materiality. Most researchers would predict that when an object is displaced, as part of

**FIGURE 1**  
 PROCESSES OF OBJECT MOVEMENT AND NETWORK TRANSFORMATION



Note.—Color version available as online enhancement.

the recommodification process, it would be moved to the garage (or similar cooling space) and then returned to the marketplace. However, we observe two other processes at work: reincorporation attempts and reengagement. Inactive singularized objects may be granted agency by the network and engaged in reincorporation attempts. In the midst of reincorporation attempts, the focal object faces either constraint or empowerment of agency that propels the object back into inactivity or to reengagement with the network, respectively.

As indicated in figure 1, our research reveals a convergence of network forces that shape the focal object’s agency including (1) the object’s own biography; (2) other singularized objects with complementary and/or competing biographies; (3) other complementary and/or competing individual, relational, or collective identity practices; and (4) shifts in contextual elements such as spaces, life events, and so on. Whether displaced or reengaged, each of these interim processes described in figure 1 is imbued with potential transformations. Just as the initial singularization of a new object transforms the biographies of each network entity

(jostling their meanings and uses), the displacement and reengagement processes also alter the network, often in unprompted and unintended ways.

### BIOGRAPHY OF THE ERIKSON FAMILY TABLE

#### Initial Singularization of the Focal Object

The story begins 30 years ago as the Sawyer family (Megan’s family of origin) outgrew the kitchen that was a center for family activities. To facilitate family identity practices we describe below, the Sawyers redesigned their kitchen (a process later replicated to similar ends in the Erikson home). Megan’s mother Joanna describes what happened:

We moved into this house in 1977 . . . after Hope was born and we adopted Daniel, we had six children. We realized we needed a bigger kitchen. . . . We tore down the wall between the kitchen and the dining room. . . . So, we went to Dallas, I think, and got the first long table, and that’s the one Megan

has now. . . . We're a little bit sentimental about the table, and we thought that it would be really neat if someone else in the family could use it.

During the 15-year span when this first long table stood in the Sawyer family kitchen, it became the hub of family interaction. Megan and Joanna offer similar accounts of how the Sawyer family used the table, and they reveal its embeddedness in everyday family identity practices.

Back then, we used the table, of course, to all gather around for dinner and sometimes for lunches if it was on the weekend. Even more than the meals, we would sit at the table because it was in the kitchen, and that's sort of where my headquarters was. . . . Everybody just sat around the table and talked. . . . The kids would do their homework. . . . We would have parties like showers for weddings or babies. . . . Our church had small group meetings. . . . And we did crafts on the table. (Joanna)

We were always having people over. . . . I love the feeling of having every—that table full. And I love the feeling that we're kind of an army, if you will. . . . "Don't mess with a Sawyer because they're an army, you know!" So I always felt the sense of protection for that. . . . Talking is a big part of our family—my family growing up and our family now. . . . We did everything on that table really. More than just eat. . . . We did school projects . . . bible studies. (Megan)

The origin story and discussion of activities that took place around the table describe the initial singularization of the object. Descriptions conform to idealized glosses of behavioral regularities (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994) as evident in terms like "all," "everybody," "always," "every," and "everything." This singularization process reverberates through a network of other practices ("crafts") and spaces (kitchen as the HQ), transforming meanings of each. The table becomes an affectively charged ("just love") sensory analogue of Sawyer and Erikson family identity (Grayson and Shulman 2000, 18) as iconic images of family are bundled with it. This is evident in the military metaphor ("headquarters," "army," "protection") family members use to characterize identity, commingling the ideas of a tight, protective organized unit operating with clear objectives. Across generations, family identity practices clearly are linked to the table from mundane talk, work, and eating to the playful and the sacred. These practices establish the historicity of the object in its repeated transformations.

### Threatened Displacement of the Focal Object

The first long Sawyer family table's biography overlapped with other spatial, object, and identity contingencies, and the table was displaced for a period. Megan reports:

When my mom redecorated her kitchen, she bought a table that was 14 feet, so she put that one [first long table] in the attic, and as soon as we were able to have the room, adding

on to the kitchen, mom's like, "It is yours whenever you want it." It's fun. . . . It makes me think of growing up, you know, whenever we see it.

The new table bears an iconic relationship to the displaced first long table in terms of its size and location. As the first long table sits displaced in the attic, Megan nonetheless takes symbolic possession of it and contemplates how to fit it into her network. Thus, in addition to its indexical meanings, the first long table is imbued with potentialities: what it could be and how it could transform the Erikson family.

The next turning point in the biography of the first long table is Reece's and Megan's complementary pilgrimage tales about Reece's efforts to bring the table to the Erikson home. The tale contains a heroic quest ("stranded in that Odyssey . . . by himself") and sacrificial elements ("wheel was up here at my chest," "vision was blurred," "sacrifice") typical of such mythic stories. This origin story introduces a theme that is replicated again and again: the monstrous effort the family undertakes to reproduce the table's agentic role in the network:

With a 13-foot size table, getting it into a minivan with the back seat and middle seat folded . . . in order for the back door to shut . . . then with the three pedestal legs, my seat had to be completely forward and my back completely in the upright position. . . . My vision was blurred. . . . I had the corner of the table next to my cheek. . . . Crazy, I was stranded in that Odyssey [for] 700 miles, 13 hours, and [in] just the most uncomfortable position. (Reece)

He [Reece] had to drive 14 hours . . . by himself, in the minivan with these two huge six-and-a-half-foot pieces, and one of them, I think, was by his cheek the whole time! . . . [It's] amazing what he did to bring that table from [state] to [state]! . . . It was a *sacrifice*. (Megan; emphasis added)

Megan and Reece's daughters' origin stories about the first long table resonate with the initial singularization introduced above:

My nana had this table in her house, and she got a new one—and really, an army can stand on it! It's so strong! (Meg)

We have this huge family. She gave it [the first long table] to us because we had the room. (Samantha)

The reproduction of the role of the table in this family's identity over generational time comes across in the narrative reuse of military metaphors ("army," "strong") and the daughters' boast about the family's size.

The Erikson family altered other network entities in order to incorporate the first long table. A dramatic example is altering the kitchen's spatial biography by remodeling it to facilitate preferred identity practices, as Megan reveals:

I've been, most of my life, in a big kitchen because everybody congregates in the kitchen. We're not really a TV family.

. . . I wanted a place where we could entertain, have people over, have big gatherings. . . . So we really wanted to kind of emphasize it as a gathering room. . . . So we decided, okay, let's enlarge it.

An enlarged kitchen in which the table is enshrined facilitates the performance of an encompassing sociality (“everybody,” “big gatherings”) that is central to Megan’s enactment of family, just as Joanna reported about the Sawyer family.

### Focal Object Biography, Indexical Associations: 1999–2006

A large table supported both Megan’s and Reece’s family-of-origin identity practices. The presence of such a table encourages replication of Sawyer family practices in the Erikson household (“There was a puzzle being worked on at the table—at Megan’s house . . . then also later at our place” [Reece]). The practice described below links the Erikson family to past generations, while allowing them to assert their specific identity (“We’ve added a few things”):

When it gets really cold, we all get around [the table] with our hot chocolate . . . and we just talk and just visit. We have a hot chocolate mix that my mom always made growing up, and so we do it too. . . . It has cocoa powder, Nestle Quick, Carnation nonfat dry milk, we’ve added a few things—oh powdered sugar . . . . The girls love to do that too. (Megan)

The space around the table may be used for family identity practices or it may be partitioned for smaller relational and individual identity practices, producing parental, father-daughter, and sibling coalitions.

We love to laugh around our table. . . . We eat around it, and we visit. . . . We have hot chocolate time. . . . And they [our daughters] have tea parties. . . . The table would be the one piece of furniture in our family that just really encompasses us as a whole. . . . All of us love to create. And so, around the table, the four girls, we’ve always provided paint, crayons . . . you name it, you know, just for them to get around the table. . . . The girls do stuff together, and they do stuff separately, but still at the table. Even Samantha, just to be with the family, she’ll be reading in her novel, but she’ll be at the table. . . . Sometimes we’re just all at the table doing our separate things. But it’s kind of nice because you see each other. (Megan)

We used one half of the table for eating and one half of the table for arts and crafts, and we’d paint there. . . . We always needed a big space in our kitchen and a big table because we always act out stuff. (Meg)

There was home school on that table. . . . I paid bills on the table. . . . When the girls were doing crafts, they were doing it at the table. . . . Sometimes it would be all of them.

. . . That table is basically in the center of our house, so everything happened around it. (Reece)

The family speaks to a web of interlocking identity practices unfolding around the table that secure its place in the network. The themes of creativity (“builds model rockets”) and work (“reloads”) also are translated into individual and relational identity practices (“coffee,” “help Samantha”) in an excerpt that describes the father’s identity practices associated with the table:

Reece and I . . . had coffee at the table. . . . Even Reece builds model rockets, and he reloads shotgun shells, and he’ll get on the table and he’ll be doing his thing. And it’s great because I look at that, and I’m like Reece is doing art around the table! He had to help Samantha with a project . . . to build a Conestoga wagon. (Megan)

Reece’s complementary creative practices—model building and shotgun shell reloading—further support the centrality of the table to the network.

In sum, as a site of enactment for positively sanctioned practices (work, creativity, and togetherness), the table’s biography holds identity value for the family as a collectivity but also for individuals and smaller groupings. Family members come together around the table, disperse, and reconvene in different assortments, alone, or as a whole. Thus, the table’s spatial centrality in the home and the convergence of the identity practices that make up its biography empower it within the network, giving it agency.

### Forces of Agency at Work

Moving to a new home creates a disruption and thrusts the focal object into a period of inactivity. The family contemplates the possible biographies of an array of objects, including the table, and of the family in its new spatial confines. There are parallels between this and prior research showing the use of objects to support retrospective (Hecht 2001) or possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986). For example, Megan reflects on a historical family enactment where they were all together in a small place, “your kids are right there on, at your feet.” This is contrasted with an aversive feared family identity, where “they’re not under your feet anymore,” and Megan worries “moving to a bigger house, I don’t want us to lose that togetherness, and I don’t want us to feel like we’ve, we’re not a unit anymore . . . I think that’s a tragedy.” Megan’s recognition and evocation of retrospective, hoped for, and feared visions of alternative family biographies stimulate choices that propel objects into active roles and periods of displacement from the network. As with self-identity projects, a hoped-for trajectory is not always realized.

After living in a home with the first long table for 8 years, the Erikson family moved to Reece’s childhood home, an ancestral farm. This move surfaced both competing indexical associations and predictable identity challenges. Dealing with the table was a priority (“first”): “It was a dilemma



. . . because when we first moved in, it was ‘what are we going to do with the table’ because we wanted to put it somewhere” (Reece). Coping with various constraints, the family attempted to reincorporate the table in four spaces before retiring it to displacement in the garage: (1) as a kitchen table, (2) as a dining room table, (3) as a craft/game/work space in a basement playroom, and (4) as a craft/painting table in a storage room. As outlined in figure 1, each reincorporation attempt uncovers the forces of agency that cohere with the network and empower and constrain the focal object: the object’s own biography, overlapping/competing identity practices, other object biographies, spatial biographies, and contextual constraints.

*First Reincorporation Attempt.* Not surprisingly, given the table’s biography, the family gave initial consideration to incorporating the table into the kitchen. This would facilitate replication of uses assigned to it in the old house and reinforce existing identity practices. Contextual space constraints were the primary reason for not using the table in this way. Figures 2 and 3 depict the family trying out the first long table in their new kitchen. Family members describe perceived spatial barriers and aesthetic considerations.

When Megan was sure it was going to fit in here [kitchen], it was assembled . . . just to actually see if it would work. . . . It was just a little too big . . . probably about twice, twice as long as we needed it. (Reece)

We moved it in, and it looked awful. . . . It just didn’t fit. (Meg)

You could only walk around one side. . . . I was kind of

**FIGURE 2**

REX AND REECE ERIKSON ASSEMBLING THE TABLE



Note.—Color version available as online enhancement.

**FIGURE 3**

ERIKSON FAMILY TRYING OUT THE TABLE



Note.—Color version available as online enhancement.

stubborn. . . . I finally gave in. . . . Even though it’s very sad to me, we had to put it back in storage. (Megan)

The focal object’s biography constrained its agency in some ways as it led the family to dismiss Reece’s suggestion to cut down the table so it would fit in the kitchen. Megan protested strongly; amputating the table would be like destroying a biological entity (“cut off my arm”). The table is too emblematic of her family’s “unique” (“nothing normal”) identity to contemplate this symbolic violence:

Reece has considered using the table and cutting it down a few feet, which, when he first said that, I thought, you might as well cut off my arm. . . . I like it because it’s uniquely large. . . . The table is unique; my family is unique. . . . I would hate to see it look like a normal table because there’s nothing normal about this family. (Megan)

The table’s biography incorporates indexical associations, in both the Sawyer and the Erikson families, as a place for purposeful gathering and entertaining in large groups, as we have shown previously. Megan’s family of origin once considered acquiring two tables instead of one but “quickly dismissed it, wanting everybody to be together” (Joanna, Megan’s mother). The Eriksons have internalized this family norm:

It’s important to try and get everyone as much as possible around one table. . . . That’s important for Megan . . . [and] for me as well. . . . I’ve seen like where kids go in a separate room, or a separate table, and it just doesn’t seem like the same thing. If worse comes to worst, I’d rather have that table set up than, say, two smaller tables to fit everyone. (Reece)

Ultimately, the first long table stayed intact, and the network granted agency to a smaller table inherited from Reece's grandmother as a temporary kitchen table. We discuss this further later.

*Second Reincorporation Attempt.* Family members' explanations for not using the table as a dining room table highlight the interplay of spaces, objects, and practices in shaping the biography of the focal object. Competing object biographies emerged to prevent this reincorporation attempt. Proximal to the Eriksons' move, Megan inherited her father's mother's (Bea's) table. The daughters confirm: "It came from . . . mom's grandma . . . something connected to our family" (Samantha). "It was from Bea" (Meg).

Bea's table came to Megan because of the singularized meanings of this object for Bea's immediate family. Dysfunctional, or at least disclaimed, family identities and routines are embedded in this table ("we have horrible memories") as well as positive ones ("big, elaborate dinner") linked to ritual identity enactments. Both elements of this table's biography help to explain how the table came to the Eriksons, who surface positive memories consistent with representations of the first long table, rather than to other potential recipients, whose associations are more negative:

That table has stories. It's not a happy story, but it's a story. . . . My dad's dad was a very abusive man. . . . When Bea went into the [nursing] home, those five siblings [dad's] all said, "We would *not* want that table. We have horrible memories about it . . . nothing good. It's very expensive, but we don't want to see it." . . . I had nothing but good memories around it. . . . On Christmas Eve, my mom and dad and all us kids would go over and have this big, elaborate dinner around this Duncan Phyfe table. Bea had these gorgeous silver candlesticks. . . . He [my grandfather] also put a silver dollar under everybody's folded, linen napkin. . . . Those are my memories of the table—all happy. (Megan)

The Eriksons could have opted to put the first long table in the dining room where it resided in the Sawyer family home, but they did not. In this case, the two tables' object biographies collide, and object and family biographies interact to activate Bea's table in the dining room space, foreclosing this potential trajectory for the first long table. To understand this choice, we must consider the confluence of values that make Bea's table comparable to the first long table. Megan accounts for this heirloom's superior singularized value in terms of multiple registers of value (Curasi et al. 2004); it incorporates market value ("Duncan Phyfe" brand), collection value ("expensive, very nice"), Diderot unity (McCracken 1988a, 118–29; "chairs . . . buffet"), and kinship value ("she's my namesake"):

She [Bea] passed down her dining room table—which is a Duncan Phyfe, . . . very expensive, very nice furniture . . . with all the chairs, and the buffet, and the tea cart, and the china hutch, all the dining room pieces—to me, and she's my namesake. (Megan)

Although the first long table incorporates kinship value and commemorative value typical of cherished home furnishings, it lacks the market, collection, and Diderot unity (even the chairs do not match) values of Bea's table. Further, Bea's table does not incorporate the negative associations it holds for other family members. When deciding how to use their first long table, family members contended with choices about how to use the newly inherited (Bea's) table:

It [the first long table] was always intended to go in the dining room. . . . We've got Bea's dining room table that Megan inherited . . . so it never did actually get to occupy the dining room because there was another table already here. (Reece)

Placed in the dining room, Bea's table sites some, though not all, of the individual and relational identity practices displaced from the beloved first long table. The family uses Bea's table in both everyday (work, creativity) routines and more ritual (birthday) practices:

That table is kind of the messy table. It always gets something collected on the top of it. I read there yesterday. (Samantha)

When it's our birthday . . . we use that table for the family party. (Meg)

The spatial biography of the dining space constrains the range of potential uses for Bea's table Reece can envision. The family pairs an indexical space (dining room) with an iconic object (Bea's table) to replicate family-of-origin identity practices. Additional network entities—Reece's and Megan's personal biographies—culminate to activate Bea's table in the dining area:

We've been sort of storing the Duncan Phyfe set in our current dining room. Reece would love for this current dining room to be more of a living room . . . [to] hang out, drink coffee, and visit . . . with really soft furniture as opposed to a table. Reece would like for a table to be in the rock room [a sitting/dining area with a rock fireplace], so we were going to try it out and put Bea's dining room Duncan Phyfe table in the rock room. . . . He grew up in this house, and he had a table in the rock room, in the exact space that he wants a table. (Megan)

There are three key points illustrated by this potential reincorporation of the first long table in the dining room. First, most prior research has emphasized object indexicality in replication of family identity practices—the idea is that the same object is used in the same way from generation to generation (Curasi et al. 2004). By contrast, a theme in our case study is use of iconic objects in replications of contending family identity practices. Second, we see the intersection of biographies—the first long table inherited by the Eriksons, Bea's inherited table, and the indexical dining room space—and demonstrate how these biographies jostle up against one another. Objects with strong indexical associations vie for a place in family members' daily lives.

Third, the excerpts above reveal object substitutability in identity practices. Grayson and his colleagues (Grayson and Martinec 2000; Grayson and Shulman 2004) elucidate the principle of object indexicality to explain object irreplaceability. However, our case study shows that objects that share biographical associations may be substitutable. Thus, we contend that objects are only irreplaceable in relation to specific family identity practices; an object with comparable material properties and spatial, indexical associations with an identity practice may be substitutable. Our data suggest that forces of agency, as identified in figure 1, shape objects' participatory potential in the network.

*Third Reincorporation Attempt.* The family considered placing the first long table in the basement play room in another prescribed role—a spot for crafts and games, which, as we showed above, figure importantly in sibling and family identity practices. But—usefully for discovering how the network shapes the biography of consumption objects—identity practices taken from both families of origin collide in this space:

They [our daughters] will always want to use the table. . . . It was just kind of a discussion on where to put the games we have down there [basement]. . . . Once we moved some of the toys that we had like the basketball [game and] . . . foosball . . . we realized there wasn't enough room in there . . . for the girls to practice their dance routines. (Reece)

When determining how to use the basement play area, the Eriksons consider how the space might facilitate identity practices of different subgroupings. Some, such as crafts and games, may involve the entire family, whereas others, such as dance routines, may affect only a sibling coalition. In the end, identity practices of certain units take precedence over family identity practices in this less central space, as reflected in the decision explained below to place a foosball table, basketball game, and an early-marriage table in this space rather than the first long table.

Both competing object and identity practice biographies from within the network constrain the placement of the long table in this space. When Reece lived in the home as a child, the basement housed a mixture of games, including a foosball game and a pool table:

We talked about using it [the first long table] in the play area . . . for crafts and . . . for a work space. . . . And then that foosball game . . . was what my parents had [in the basement]. . . . We [me and my brothers] all played on it. . . . Megan had foosball as she was growing up, and so we both said, "yeah, we'll keep it here." . . . Also, when the girls have friends over and stuff, that always gets played with. (Reece)

The foosball table's biography carries a relational practice common both to his and Megan's family-of-origin biographies, but it has masculine sibling identity connotations for Reece ("me and my brother"). As such, it is a poten-

tially powerful adversary to the first long table as inherited competitive family practices embedded in the foosball table conflict with cooperative creative practices embedded in the first long table. Both facilitate supra-family commensalism ("friends over and stuff"). The copresence of these two special objects tests family decisions regarding this space, illustrating the interplay of object biographies and intertwined identity practices. Overlapping competitive and complementary biographies explain why the foosball table remained in the space and why this potential reincorporation of the first long table did not lead to its reengagement with the network.

Ultimately, the Eriksons also decided to use another small table in the basement play room for games or crafts, making space both for dance and foosball and other relational identity practices it facilitates. This third (and small) table's biography intersects with Megan and Reece's biography as a couple, giving it distinctive identity value: "It was our main eating table until we moved to [state]" (Reece). However, it might not be considered a family identity piece. Reece and Megan have not articulated its origin story to the daughters, as is required for successful transfer of heirloom special possessions (Curasi et al. 2004), and the table is too small for the entire family to gather around. Performing the married couple's identity in this context does not seem a priority for the Eriksons. However, individuals and smaller groups enact creative projects on this early-marriage table: "We do puzzles on it. It's kind of a small table where it can only fit four people" (Meg).

Spatial constraints restrict use of the first long table in the play area. As in the first two spaces, the 13-foot table dominated the area and might have prohibited relational identity practices the family envisioned (such as dancing or plays). In the next excerpt, we see both an affirmation of the family's identity value for the table ("little girls always wanted it") and a rare negative characterization ("this leviathan") as a result of failed reincorporation attempts:

We thought about putting it downstairs as like a craft table or some kind of game table. . . . There really wasn't a spot that it would fit. . . . It's like this leviathan that you're walking around. . . . There were discussions, and of course the little girls always wanted it no matter what to be anywhere. (Megan)

As a result of this culmination of overlapping object, space, and practice biographies, the network activated the foosball table and the couple's early-marriage table in this space. Thus, this potential reengagement of the first long table was never realized, leaving it outside the network in a period of inactivity.

*Fourth Reincorporation Attempt.* In another reincorporation attempt, the family imagined the first long table could be "used in our storage room for painting and activities" (Reece). Again, contextual space constraints prevented this reincorporation attempt: "It didn't really make that room as usable as we wanted" (Megan). Instead, the family placed

a smaller table they characterize as more disposable in the room. However, despite this table being described by Meg as “gross and disgusting” and by Samantha as “the outcast table,” Meg views this table as important because for a short time creative sibling coalition–building practices were shifted to this network entity:

*Samantha:* We were going to have this big table in the storage room.

*Meg:* But, it didn’t work out. We don’t have room.

*Researcher:* Are any of these tables important to your family?

*Meg:* Yes! The only one that’s really, really important to us is the one in the storage room [Samantha makes a questioning face] because that’s where we do all of our crafts.

*Samantha:* Mom and dad cleaned up the storage room, and it was really looking good. But now . . .

*Meg:* The next day it was trashed.

Thus, although it appears that the biography of this smaller outcast table is unimportant, the family highlights the identity practice of crafts as an overriding element in defining its value. However, in the next section, we see that the family’s attempt to shift this identity practice from its original site (the first long table) to the outcast table results in the displacement of the practice. Given constraints to the first long table’s agency in this space as well, it is once again relinquished to an inactive role.

## Network Transformations

The Erikson family’s first long table presently resides in the garage. They continue to report efforts to reincorporate the table into an active role in the network. Family members request the table for various celebrations that were prominent elements of its biography prior to the move. Assembling and disassembling the table is a labor- and time-intensive process, and, given the abundance of other tables in the Erikson’s home, this appears paradoxical. But consideration of the table’s historicity resolves this conundrum for the Eriksons:

My mom entertained a lot . . . host[ing] wedding and baby showers. . . . It was very much . . . a celebration table. . . . This would have been the first year that I had a back-to-school coffee without the table. That would have really made me sad, so I had Reece and Rex [Reece’s father] . . . put it together for the back-to-school coffee. (Megan)

That’s the table to have for their [daughters’] projects or whatever they were making together. (Reece)

We have brought it in for birthday parties. (Samantha)

We needed more room to work. . . . It was kind of our whole family’s [idea to bring the long table in]. (Meg)

We saved it until my birthday because I was like, I really love this table. (Samantha)

The Eriksons’ commitment to identity practices that support their ideal family biography (encompassing sociality, projects, creativity, and ritual celebration) leads to periodic enlistment of the first long table. Several ideas come out of these illustrative enlistments. First, all of these examples underscore that the family feels strongly that these identity practices must take place around this table as opposed to some iconic table with similar properties. For example, crafts and projects can resume as an identity practice only if this table comes back into the house. Interestingly, Bea’s table might appear to be a superior site for the practice of hosting a back-to-school coffee because of the Diderot unity that comes with it and the higher value of this table to enacting a public social identity (brand name, collection value, material quality). Despite this, the family enlists the first long table; indexicality seems vital to maintain certain practices.

Further, as hinted at above, the first long table’s absence has altered some everyday family identity practices. The family uses a kitchen table that was owned by Reece’s grandmother. However, this table’s origin and performative associations are unclear to nearly all, which, following Curasi et al. (2004), may contribute to their lack of interest in making it more central to their identity practices. The family agrees that they do not want to keep Reece’s grandmother’s table; they feel that it stifles the identity practices the family considers essential. While some practices have shifted to other spaces in the home, others occur less frequently (“haven’t done as many”) or differently than before, as suggested by the recurrence of themes of discomfort (“scrunched,” “too small”) and displacement in the following excerpts:

*Meg:* We have a smaller table now, and [we’re so scrunched].

*Samantha:* Ouch, I just bumped my knee. . . . We had a space to leave our crafts on the other table. . . . It was really nice to have one end of the table where . . . we could just leave it there. Right after dinner, we’d come back and do it. . . . It’s different now because you can just forget about it [“Yeah” (Meg)]. . . . We haven’t done as many crafts . . . since we moved.

*Megan:* One thing I’ve noticed is that because we don’t enjoy being at that table as much. . . . When I’m going to read a story, we all jump on the brown couch.

*Researcher:* Was reading something you used to do around the old table?

*Megan:* Uh huh, and lots of art, lots of art, lots of crafts, things like that. I feel like the current table we use now is just too small to get all of that accomplished.

The confluence of network forces constrains the incorporation of the first long table into the Erikson’s new home. It remains relegated to storage, inactive and displaced from the family’s everyday identity practices. However, the fam-

ily also asserts plans to remodel, and expanding the kitchen once again enters their thoughts. If so, this would be the third kitchen remodeled to accommodate this 13-foot first long table. There is still some question about how (and if) the table will resume its active role in the network. But, based on the findings in the previous section, the network does grant the table some agency, as evidenced in its repeated reengagement with the network in support of certain identity practices.

In summary, the case demonstrates how singularized objects move from active to displaced to active again in the network. Moreover, the network mobilizes a singularized object to support self, relational, and family identity practices. Finally, the case reveals the dynamic interaction of biographies of objects, practices (personal, relational, and family), and spaces to unveil the conditions that lead to movement and evolution of each. We illustrate how indexical and iconic objects, spaces, and identity practices displace one another and peacefully coexist as part of the network. In the next section, we will elaborate on how these themes extend and challenge existing theory.

## DISCUSSION

Our objective was to examine what happens between the initial singularization of a focal object and its recommodification. We extend the theory of singularization as advanced by Kopytoff and explored by many others (Curasi et al. 2004; Gosden and Marshall 1999; Hurdley 2006). We demonstrate that it is not only the singularization of an object combined with contextual shifts (e.g., family transitions and marketplace dynamics) that determines whether the object is retained or returned to the marketplace (Belk et al. 1989; Curasi et al. 2004) but also the focal object's agency—granted by its place and history in a network. That is, it is not sufficient, as some research has posited, to reinforce, share, and ritualize the indexical associations that make an object irreplaceable to underscore its sacred status (Belk et al. 1989; Chevalier 1999; Curasi et al. 2004; Grayson and Shulman 2000; Miller 2001; Money 2007).

The Erikson family engaged the first long table in many practices known for perpetuating sacredness, such as sustaining rituals (e.g., birthday celebrations, back-to-school coffee) and tangibilizing contamination (e.g., taking photographs; Belk et al. 1989). However, we demonstrate that a singularized object can maintain perpetual importance and sacred status in a family and still be displaced by a convergence of network forces. Our framework explains a similarly paradoxical displacement Miller (2008) observed recently as objects armed with inertia were “displaced and reconfigured by new things” (62). These objects may remain enshrined and kept from recommodification, but they are considered inactive in this framework. Our findings uncover the processes that move an already singularized object in and out of a network, identify the forces that constrain and empower a singularized object's agency within that network, and finally demonstrate transformations of the network that result from the object's movement.

## Processes

We identify four processes that move a singularized object in and out of a network: threatened displacement, displacement, reincorporation attempts, and reengagement. Our research shows that a singularized object may be pushed into fluctuating periods of activity and inactive displacement. In addition, prior work on object meaning over time has focused either on increased object value via singularization or appropriation processes (Belk et al. 1989; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981) or disposition associated with changes in life cycle stages and diminished object meaning (Curasi et al. 2004; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005). In contrast, this study goes beyond the sharply drawn distinction between commodified and singularized objects (Kopytoff 1986) to show how singularized objects play variable roles within a family over time. We know that singularized objects may be consistently threatened with displacement when faced with the introduction of new objects (e.g., replacement models), inheritance of objects with competing value, contextual transitions such as moving to a new home, and so on (Belk 1992; Curasi et al. 2004). However, consumer researchers have yet to consider how object agency is implicated in the distinction between *threatened* and *actual* displacement. In other words, as demonstrated in our longitudinal case study, agency granted by a network of overlapping identity practices and complementary object biographies, for example, can rescue an object from displacement through reincorporation attempts.

Object agency again emerges as important between processes of reincorporation and reengagement. We find that, when singularized objects are displaced, families may contemplate and prospect for how to reincorporate them into family practices. However, reincorporation attempts are constrained by identity practices, by other objects' biographies, by the object's historicity, and by the iconic and indexical associations families have with other objects and spaces. For example, the higher market value of another singularized object (Bea's table) with similar indexical and iconic meanings jostles the focal object out of the dining room. In other instances, network forces converge to empower the focal object, resulting in reengagement with the network, such as when the Eriksons bring the first long table back in to host celebrations.

## Forces of Agency

Another important contribution of our study is the identification of the primary forces that constrain and empower an already singularized object's agency within domestic practices of materiality. As stressed in much prior research, the initial singularization of a focal object and its unfolding biography, replete with indexical associations, empowers and constrains object agency. Similarly, contextual shifts, such as family transitions, arrival of new objects, or altered spaces, have been identified as forces that can propel recommodification of singularized objects (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005). However, many other forces empower and

constrain object agency that have not been previously elaborated.

We integrate Kopytoff's conception of object biographies, network theorists' ideas of agency, and consumer researchers' recent work on family identity practices to provide a parsimonious explanation of the interplay between object singularization and object agency in driving network transformations. Although Kopytoff highlights the mutual transformation of objects and persons (Gosden and Marshall 1999), a network conception of object agency provides the necessary explanations for how and under what conditions these transformations might occur. In addition to bringing Kopytoff's biography of things and network-agency theories together, we also specify the network entities at work. Within the network, we observe existing and envisioned identity practices of individuals, relational units, and the family as a collectivity that overlap and compete with one another (Epp and Price 2008). We also consider the biographies of other objects in the network, abounding with their own indexical and iconic associations as they complement and vie for space against the focal object. Finally, we consider not only the structural constraints of a space but also its biography. These network entities converge to empower or constrain objects.

Our approach resonates with research in material culture studies that argues against a simple dualism in agency and instead posits a complex interplay of objects and persons (Chevalier 1999; Hurdley 2006; Knorr Cetina 1997; Miller 2001; Money 2007; Zwick and Dholakia 2006). An excellent illustration of the myriad network forces at play is the privileging of the foosball table over the first long table in the basement play area. The empowerment of the foosball table comes from the conjunction of complementary identity practices from Megan's and Reece's families of origin, complementary sibling identity practices in carving out a space for plays or dance routines, indexical associations for Reece, and complementary object biographies that form a Diderot unity (e.g., basketball game, foosball table, and the early-marriage table all highlight "gaming") as set against the competing biography of the long table. Paradoxically, the basketball game, which only recently entered the household, is also privileged over the singularized focal object because it is pulled into the network, drawing on the meanings and uses of the space as a game area.

### Network Transformations

Our final contribution is to explain how the movement of a singularized object in and out of a network of activity inevitably transforms the network. At each juncture in the singularized biography of an object (depicted in fig. 1), the network is jostled and potentially transformed. For example, when an object enters a network of existing objects, spaces, and practices, it vies for meaning and use within that web, forcing the other network entities to adjust. Similarly, threatened or actual displacement modifies the network, as do reincorporation attempts and reengagement. Focusing on network transformations is important because they provide

a theoretical explanation for paradoxical findings in our research.

Despite the first long table's biography filled with indexical associations, its strong links to identity practices, and its enduring importance to the family, this focal object is repeatedly displaced by other objects in the network. Consumer research would predict that, because of its indexical associations that verify important moments for the family, the long table would be considered irreplaceable (Grayson and Shulman 2000). By contrast, our study suggests that the biographies of other objects that may also verify these same moments in family members' lives may be consequential for one another. Specifically, competing objects may replace seemingly irreplaceable objects in the performance of specific identity practices. Further, iconic objects also sometimes take the place of indexical objects in identity practices (such as when spatial constraints or other object biographies prevent or force families to contemplate displacement of the original, indexical object). For example, we show that iconic properties of Bea's table and the indexical properties of the spaces it inhabits converge to displace the first long table. We identify multiple examples where iconic objects are at play (e.g., Joanna's new 14-foot table and Bea's table). However, in some instances, indexicality seems vital. At some level, it is not so surprising when, in a ritual practice, such as in the case of a public performance of back-to-school coffee, the long table seems essential. It is more difficult to explain the insistence on indexicality when the practice is about everyday enactments of family (crafts). Our findings suggest that, despite attempts to reincorporate this central family identity practice, it has been displaced except when they bring the table back into the house specifically to facilitate this practice. The result is a clear transformation of the network as objects and practices interplay.

Network transformations also explain a second paradox that emerged in our findings. Prior research explains that individuals may dispose of objects or activities they no longer feel are relevant to their identities (Kleine and Baker 2004; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995; Kleine, Kleine, and Laverie 2006). However, our research highlights a more puzzling phenomenon: families displace consumption practices that they claim are central to their identities. Epp and Price (2008) posit that families' identity practices will be disrupted over time, but they do not empirically investigate the consequences of this disruption, especially as practices are linked to other practices and objects. Thus, our study offers an explanation for why a valued identity practice might be displaced. In the Erikson family, convergent and overlapping identity practices are more prominent than divergent and competing practices. However, divergence and competition among identity practices emerges in the family's move to a new home with new objects potent with competing identities, such as Bea's table, Reece's grandmother's (temporary kitchen) table, and Reece's family's foosball table. As the biographies of these objects and practices traverse this new space, the Erikson family directs careful attention to ensuring the continuance of certain iden-

tivity practices (e.g., making a place for the girls to dance and create plays). Thus sibling, immediate family, and extended family identity practices are privileged over couple and masculine identity practices in arrangements of objects in the basement even though the family espouses an ideology of patriarchal authority. These choices resulted in unintended consequences for taken-for-granted identity practices. For example, family members assumed that they would eventually find a new place to do crafts—as evidenced in their attempts to reincorporate the first long table into spaces that would allow them to do crafts together (e.g., basement play area and storage room). Instead, somewhat different practices and objects filled these spaces, transforming the ways in which the Eriksons “do family.”

The unintended consequences we point to above underscore that network transformations do not always unfold as envisioned. We examined numerous possible transformations of the focal object that never materialized, such as the many failed attempts to reincorporate the long table in the new home, and we outlined the related outcomes for the other objects and practices that make up the network. Network transformations prompt object meanings to move in and out of focus and thrust valued practices to other singularized objects as contexts shift. Thus, when families make seemingly mundane choices about object uses, spatial arrangements, and identity practices, they set the stage for network forces to converge in ways that both empower and constrain the focal object’s agency and shape its biography.

## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Our study’s findings also might inform future research. First, the figure we created is a simplified depiction focused on a single focal object as part of a network, but we could shift the study’s focus to any network entity, such as a specific identity practice, another focal object, or a different space, to examine its movement in and out of the network. As these same processes of threatened displacement, displacement, reincorporation attempts, and reengagement may apply to other network entities, our figure can address questions of replaceability or loyalty to these entities when constrained or granted agency by a network. Research has investigated object attachment (Kleine and Baker 2004), irreplaceability (Grayson and Shulman 2000), and inalienability (Curasi et al. 2004), but less is known about whether and how these theories about objects transfer to theories about practices.

Second, we have examined one network within a domestic context, but multiple networks may be implicated by focal objects that were outside the scope of this study (e.g., work and leisure). It seems logical that some networks may be more or less malleable than others. That is, some networks may be more or less open to transformation: spaces may only offer particular uses, objects may be couched in Diderot unities, practices may be more embedded or structured, and so on. This has led practice theoreticians to distinguish category-bound activities from category-open activities (Coulter 2001); for example, some kinds of hosting are bound to

kin keepers (Curasi et al. 2004). Families may thus seek to bind practices and things to family members as markers of identity (Epp and Price 2008). Network malleability is especially important for marketers. Just as our case study family envisioned many potential trajectories for the first long table, marketers could encourage families to envision the integration of new products into one or more of families’ diverse networks. Similar to the way the Duncan Phyfe brand name shaped agency for Bea’s table, marketers may inspire or diminish an object’s agency within a network. More work should examine the role of marketer-initiated stimuli in processes of agency.

Consider the introduction of Microsoft’s X-Box game console into a family’s network. As it becomes singularized with family meanings, the X-Box might compete with or displace an older Sony Playstation. It may also create new uses for spaces and solutions for how to prevent sound from spilling out into other rooms. Additionally, it could shift patterns of practice among family members, creating new gaming practices among some and displacing other practices such as evening rituals of watching TV together or completing homework assignments. Research on how marketers introduce new products into networks could contribute to research on categorization and constellations (Holbrook and Lehmann 1981; Jain, Desai, and Mao 2007). Although previous research considers the way consumers think about objects as part of a set or category, it does not consider the agentic properties of networks or the forces that grant and constrain such agency.

Third, our study raises some questions about the relationships among network entities that merit further work. For instance, in what ways, if any, are links to particular network entities more important to ensuring a continued active role in the network than others (e.g., links to family vs. individual identity practices)? Epp and Price (2008) posit that the interplay of family, relational, and individual identity practices is central to our understanding of person-object relations. We can extend this work by asking, is there a hierarchy of importance among network entities? This general question could address specific issues, such as whether objects singularized by children take on more important roles or whether objects linked to parental identity practices take precedence, for example. Answers to these questions have implications for whether objects and practices are retained by a family, returned to the commodity sphere, or rendered inactive.

Finally, adopting a network perspective to rethink singularization and object agency, as in the current study, could inform researchers about a broader set of related network issues. For instance, what happens when the network breaks down? Studies of network breakdown typically examine failures of cybernetic networks or flow issues, such as in a traffic network breakdown where multiple agents both inside and outside the network may hold some responsibility for its successful functioning. Our study suggests that movement of entities into and out of a network (e.g., objects purchased from the marketplace, inherited, or discarded)

have a transformational influence. However, under what conditions do these transformations result in a network breakdown? In other words, what are the minimum requirements for the network to continue to function, meaning to support families in their everyday strivings to perform family? It seems that loss of significant parts of the network (e.g., loss of home and relationship dissolution) may challenge networks to the point of breakdown in some cases. Work in this area could contribute to consumer research on loss of possessions, homelessness, and family life changes.

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