

# Everyday objects as the tools of trauma therapy - examination of the material culture of young refugees in Hungary for trauma processing

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## Abstract

Objects integrate, socialise and teach us, mirror our past and self. They also represent our home, as we can take them with us when moving. What happens to our objects when this move is accompanied by trauma and compulsion? The aim of this research is to understand the significance of the object, the smallest physical unit of the home, in the recovery processes of forced migrants. In parallel with theoretical and field research, interviews were conducted with forced migrants with the main question of "To what everyday objects can forced migrants be attached to and what do those objects mean to them?". The paper first presents the literature review of the ongoing interaction between people and objects, highlighting aspects of forced migration and trauma processing. After it introduces the results of the interviews. The coping strategy of the interviewees is associated with activity and social connections: the individual memories of their past are replaced by the collective actions of their future. By collective actions it is possible to gain the two main goals of trauma processing: the individual is not only restoring the lost control of its life but also the individual does it among a community. Therefore the result of literature review and in-depth interviews proves that objects can play an important role in processing trauma at all three stages of recovery (creating security, restoring memories and grieving loss, reconnecting to everyday life). It becomes clear that refugees have much less emotional expectation of their objects than a place called "home", which means objects can become a neutral tool for a painless methodology for processing trauma. From the results of this research, a design therapy toolkit will be created, which can initiate therapeutic, learning and community-building processes by developing place and object attachment: it can provide a creative tool for professionals, educators and therapists working with those who have lost their homes.

## Author keywords

loss of space; boundary objects; object attachment; forced migration; design therapy.

## Introduction

Forced migration is a traumatising event (Silove et al., 1997). The traumatic reaction occurs when the self-defence system is overloaded and stops functioning; the individual can neither fight nor escape (Herman, 2015). The traumatic events of forced migration are, on one hand, the push factors (war, per-

secution, disaster), the experience of multiple losses (of loved ones, home, possessions and existence) and the inevitable transformation of one's culture upon arriving in a new environment (Hautzinger et al., 2014). The purpose of this study is to understand the importance of the smallest physical unit of the home – our everyday objects – in the recovery processes of the trauma of forced migration. Restoring the self-structure and control of the traumatised person are the primary goal of the recovery process (Abram Kardiner, Martin Symonds, Evan Strak, Anne Flitcraft cited by Herman, 2015), which has to happen through connection with others (Herman, 2015). The three stages of recovery are: the creation of security (1), the restoration of memories and grief of loss (2) and the reconnection to everyday life (3) (Herman, 2015). The importance of attachment to our objects appears in both Hungarian (Dúll, 2009, Wilhelm, 2014) and international literature (Belk, 1992, Csíkszentmihályi & Halton, 2011). In the context of migration, objects have particular importance since they make the home moveable, so they can maintain its sense of continuity (Dúll, 2009). Studies mostly examined the object culture of refugees in refugee camps and in the transitional areas of the borders (Korac, 2009, Dudley, 2010, Guevara González, 2022). In contrast, this study examines a population that already has a residence permit, official education and a permanent job, so their experiences are not framed to the limitations of illegality and refugee camps.

## Method

The research process relies on three methods. The first is a review of the relevant literature in order to create the context: the psychology of migration and the nature of trauma, material culture and cultural anthropology, symbolism, psychology and, within that, environmental psychology. The second is in-depth interviews with young adult forced migrants, the third is the author's 10-year fieldwork experience, including creative workshops and projects with refugees, as well as consultations and discussions with professionals working with refugees.

In-depth interviews were conducted with young forced migrants, a population that has been repeatedly traumatised and had to leave its homeland behind. They allow insight into how material culture can become part of their coping strategy in order to create a new home in a foreign country. The central question of the interview was "To what everyday objects can forced migrants be attached to and what do those



objects mean to them?" with two main focuses: what old objects they own from their homeland (1), in case of another journey, what objects they would take with themselves (2). The interviews were conducted with 19 people respecting five main conditions to filter the population into a more specific group of individuals who share similar past experiences of displacement. All the interviewees: had to consider themselves as forced migrants (1), had to be between the ages of 18 and 40 (2), had to be born outside Europe (3), already lived in Europe for at least two years, including at least one year in Budapest (4), already have a residence permit and/or recognized refugee status (5). During the interviews, an interactive model was followed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) supported by visual games and tasks. The interviews were conducted mainly in person (and due to the pandemic situation, partly through online video calls) and each lasted 1 hour.

The research also relies on the author's 10 years of field experiences. Since January 2013, she has been working with young refugees and asylum seekers as a volunteer of a Hungarian association called *Útilapu Hálózat*, where she founded the Open Doors working group with her graphic design partner, Ágnes Jekli. She facilitated short (half to one day) creative workshops (textile silk printing, bookbinding, furniture renovation, mural painting), and long (1-12 weeks) projects (designing and renovating community spaces, media training, placemaking camps). The goal is always to involve people in the design and implementation process so they can make their own decisions, gain new competencies, develop their creative problem-solving skills and build community. The experiences were discussed with professionals working with refugees (psychologists, teachers, social workers, project coordinators). The results were documented in the form of photos, videos and diary entries (Sztompka, 2009).

### The diverse role of objects in the context of migration

There is a characteristic and extremely stable transaction between the material environment and human behaviour: every material environment typically triggers and maintains persistent patterns of behaviour over a long period of time, even if the given people change in the environment (Dúll, 2009). Because of the ongoing interaction between people and objects, it is relevant to study the combined phenomenon of them together (Wilhelm, 2014, p. 24).

To measure the individual's attachment to objects, the empirical research of Kapitány Ágnes and Gábor (2005, p. 126), can help with its scaling: respondents answered that objects are "important", "only certain objects are important" and "not important" was chosen the least. According to Belk (1992, cited by Dúll, 2009), attachment to property can have a negative effect if it is so strong that it negatively affects the relationship with other people or if the attachment is so extreme that the loss (or damage) of the object puts the self itself in danger.

Objects can symbolise social integration or differentiation (Csíkszentmihályi & Halton, 2011). The object can embody the power and knowledge of its owner, it can make its social affiliation visible. Community can give meaning to express ourselves, but at the same time it can also mean social separation (like a cross or a flag) (Kapitány & Kapitány, 2021). Integration and connection can be strengthened by exchange of objects: it is a general cultural phenomenon to

treat gifts differently (Wilhelm, 2014). "Boundary objects" are able to mediate and create a connection between different groups, as they can be related to all members of the group (Wilhelm, 2014). However, they can also be the source of confusion (Hall, 1975, p. 29).

Objects offer the opportunity to learn (Csíkszentmihályi & Halton, 2011). Whether it is about fitting into social norms, our own personal development, or the environment that supports our learning. The presence of our objects create a familiar, supportive and inspiring environment, so the owner's identity can be strengthened again (Csíkszentmihályi & Halton, 2011).

Objects can develop the self (Kapitány & Kapitány, 2021). Sartre (1943, cited by Dúll, 2009, p. 147) states, objects are integrated into our identity through: "craft knowledge (1), the creation of the object (2) getting to know the object (3)" Our own objects ensure control over the environment, strengthen self-concept, increase self-confidence, provide a sense of security, and allow us to present our identity to ourselves and others (Dúll 2009, p. 141). Different objects convey different messages: about our daily life, occupation, values, cultural habits (Kapitány & Kapitány, 2010). With objects, we create our own cultural environment (Csíkszentmihályi & Halton, 2011, p. 159).

Lifeless objects very actively influence personal behaviour connecting to the place called home (Dúll, 2009, p. 139). Without our objects, we would not be able to inhabit our environment, move our home from one place to another and reform our old patterns (Dúll, 2009, p. 142).

Csíkszentmihályi and Halton (2011) examined the difference between active and contemplative objects. Referring to Hannah Arendt, the first (active) cultivates the personality through individual action, while the second (contemplative) through conscious thought and reflection (1958, cited by Csíkszentmihályi & Halton, 2011).

In the case of forced migration, rescued and lost objects, just like objects that help survival need to be examined as well. Schwarz (1996, cited by Dúll, 2009, p. 155) examined flood victims in the USA, where the focus was on saved objects: of sentimental attachment (1), that reflect and shape the owner's self (2), of "invested sweat" (3), with cultural meaning (4), of survival (5). Connected to lost objects, more respondents mentioned losing a piece of their personality (Kapitány & Kapitány, 2005). According to Turner (1969, p. 108), during the rite of passage, the liminal person is the one who has nothing, who is represented practically naked, and from this "nothingness" he rebuilds himself with new status and objects.

We can therefore see by the literature review that we should not underestimate the role of objects in processing trauma. By the presence of our well known objects we experience a familiar and safe environment, so the owner's identity can be developed again. Objects materialise our past, our culture and identity, therefore they can help to recall memories. Also attachment to objects can be formed through memory. Objects have a significant role in reconnecting us to life, since they integrate us into new communities, they teach us to the social norms, support our education and boundary objects can represent a bridge between people with different cultural backgrounds. If we start from the assumption that "objects imbued with emotional attachment (i.e. things)" actively contribute not only to the already mentioned teaching, integration and the "personal, social and cultural construction of

our self, but also to the creation, maintenance and eventual restructuring of the experience of continuity" (Dúill, 2009, p. 156), then objects can have significant role in the recovery processes of migrants.

### The objects of forced migration

At the intersection of forced migration and material culture, studies mostly examined the material culture of refugees in refugee camps and in the transitional areas. The focus of Dudley's (2010) research is on the material, object and emotional dimensions of being a refugee. Analysing camp life of Karenni refugees, she revealed how they practise their daily routine through their objects and thus create their reinterpreted "home". She mainly focused on textiles, which, according to the results, can form a bridge between the refugees' past, present and future, especially if these clothes are made by refugees themselves after arriving in the refugee camp (Dudley, 2010, p. 126). Maja Korac (2009) examined the integration of refugees settled in Rome and Amsterdam. She examined the residents of an asylum centre, where clothing was a key value as well. Korac also emphasises the importance of clothes: the fact that refugees themselves sew, repair, wash and protect these items is important in addition to the purchase of them (Korac, 2009, p. 344).

Both researchers gave particular importance to textiles from the point of view of the refugees' possessions and attachments. Within the framework of Open Doors, the author was able to experience as well how a canvas bag, which a few hours earlier was impersonal and only a mass product, became a self-representative object. Silk printing workshops are often organised for young refugees and immigrants, where the participants can shape the textiles into their own image. During the workshops, they get to know the techniques of colour mixing and silk printing, they work deeply on their own ideas, they are also inspired by each other, they help each other in the process, and the end result is an object of their own, which they are proud to wear.

In contrast to Dudley's and Korac's study, this research examines a population that already has a residence permit, official education and a permanent job, so their experiences are not framed to the limitations of illegality and refugee camps. The interviewees of this paper live in their own rented room or flat and they manage their own everyday life with their own rules and decisions. The interviews wanted to explore what everyday objects can forced migrants be attached to and what do those objects mean to them? The questions were focused on two main topics: what old belongings they own from their homeland (1) and in case of another big journey, what objects they would take with themselves (2). Besides the fact that few significant consensus was found between the individual answers, also three outstanding differences between the objects of the past and objects of the future were recognised.

The most significant consensus was the first reaction of all of them: they do not keep any objects from their homeland, and they would not take anything special with them in case of another journey. The most frequent explanations for the lack of objects from the homeland were sudden decision-making, tragic life situations and practical reasons. But objects of the past are not missing for practical reasons only. In the first half of the study, we clarified that objects have a prominent role in relocating our home (Dúill, 2009). This con-

tinuity is interrupted by the fact that refugees hardly keep any objects from their past. Trauma poses a threat to place and object attachment by fundamentally damaging it (Dúill, 2009), so it can result that traumatised people do not necessarily want (or are not yet ready) to recreate their home. Later, when the refugee would be ready, this gap cannot be filled with authentic objects from the homeland, but it can be bridged with creativity. An Afghan member of the Open Doors community represents an example for this creative bridging. He does not have any objects from his past, but today thanks to the progress of his integration and recovery, he facilitates creative workshops regularly: he teaches others how to make and fly an Afghan kite. It means that he reconstructs his cultural heritage and knowledge and passes it on to the new, inclusive culture, while he himself recreates it.

Another important similarity in the answers was that in the progress of the conversation 9 interviewees found objects from their past and all of them realised that they have belongings to bring with themselves on a journey. Their objects from the past are family photographs, jewellery (it preserves the memory of the family), a spoon (it is practical), a book (it preserves the culture), money notes from home (which according to him it means nothing), a tie (more like a memory). The objects for the future are cooking equipment (to share culture), shisha and guitar (to spend time together), sewing machine and a big bed (to help a friend who is in need), study books, professional degrees, portfolios, also pictures and a globe (as memories).

The first outstanding difference between the past and future objects is the quantity of them: 10 interviewees had no belongings from the past while all of them had something for the future. It means that the nakedness of liminal persons (Turner, 1969) is represented by the missing objects from the past. Owning nothing, leaving everything behind: we can only bring our environment to a limited extent, we ourselves are much more mobile and we don't always know and don't always want to take our objects with us (Wilhelm, 2014, p. 25). This nakedness significantly dissolves in the future, but it cannot be ignored that those who have been living in Hungary for more years with recognized status still believe at first: nothing important they would take with themselves on another big journey. The nakedness of liminality therefore dissolves only slowly. We can conclude that the interviewed forced migrants are mostly free of close ties to their objects. Based on the empirical research of Kapitány Ágnes and Gábor, in a more detailed statement we can assume that for forced migrants objects are primarily "not important", and secondarily "some objects may be important". There is an important change in this, as the nudity of the past has visibly changed, and the number of the objects has increased over the years.

The second main difference is that the contemplative objects of the past are replaced by active objects of the future. Past objects mostly preserve memories and are only marginally practical, this ratio is reversed in the case of the objects of the future. Among the objects of the past, there are functional objects (a tie, a spoon, slippers), but they are present in the refugees' lives as memories, not as objects of use. The touch of a household object can recall painful memories and by this, they might be removed from their original use, transformed into objects like pieces of a collection (Földessy, 2014). The active objects of the future also serve survival: objects support or symbolise employment and profession. Also

the process of building a new identity can be read from these active objects. Recalling Sartre's grouping, objects become part of the self mainly through masterly control here. Also two of the respondents referred to the creation of the object (portfolios). According to my field experience self-created objects might have the same importance in carrying identity as objects of mastery control in case the individuals have the chance and tools to create and personalise their own objects.

The third significant difference is that the objects of the past connect only the narrow circle of the family, while the objects of the future are largely connected to friends and to an even wider community: to the society. The objects of the past are accompanied with fear, lost and painful memories, in contrast most of the objects of the future are connected and serve the narrower (bed, shisha, cooking equipment, sewing machine, instrument) or wider (degrees of profession, work tools, portfolios) community. Considering that the development of social networks is essential for not only processing trauma (Herman, 2015) but also for new place attachment (Dúll, 2009), boundary objects have particular importance, as they can form a bridge between the foreigner and the native. According to my field experiences, practically anything can become a boundary object: at the Open Doors workshops, I witnessed how a photograph, a pair of shoes, a piece of clothing, a bicycle, a camera or even a ball became boundary objects. From the in-depth interviews, books, cooking equipment, but also objects representing the acquired knowledge, the musical instrument and the shisha, can be considered boundary objects.

Even if it was stated in the method session that this paper only uses the results of the material culture phase of the in-depth interviews, it is still relevant to highlight one important connection to the phase of place called home. According to the interviewees, even years after their arrival to Hungary, they still find it difficult to call their Hungarian accommodation "home". It is important to include this detail here, because according to this, the relationship of refugees to objects compared to the place called home is much less painful and they consider objects much less important. It also means they set much less emotional expectations for their favourite objects, as for a place that can be called "home". Taking advantage of this, we can consider objects as neutral tools in processing trauma: objects can become a tool for a less painful methodology, which does not force the artificial development of a sense of home on the target group.

### Conclusions - Collective actions

The intent of this article was to explore how material culture can support recovery from trauma. The literature review proves that objects can play an important role in processing trauma at

its all three stages: (1) to support the sense of security, objects create a safe and well known environment, (2) objects can materialise the past and culture, therefore they can help to recall memories and (3) objects have a significant role in reconnecting us to life, since they integrate us into new communities, they teach us to the social norms and also support our education and development. Also according to the interviews, objects can support processing trauma of forced migration, since the coping strategy of the interviewees is associated with activity and social connections. By collective actions it is possible to gain the two main goals of trauma processing: the individual is not only restoring the lost control of its life but also the individual does it among a community. According to the interviews, forced migrants are not attached strongly to their objects because of the trauma of forced migration.

These key findings suggest that objects can become a tool of trauma therapy by creating a neutral, less painful methodology which serves security, memory and reconnection. The results of this research are used to develop the base methodology of "design therapy", which is aiming to involve people who experienced the trauma of losing a place (forced migrants, children in state care, homeless people, prisoners ect.) into the design process.

There are two major limitations in this study that could be addressed in future research. First, the study focused on forced migrants who were born outside of Europe: in the future it would be worth to examine less diverse populations, like interviewees from the Middle East or from specific countries of Africa ect. Second, the interviews had limitations because of the language barriers. It would be worth combining the field research with interviews in a more structured way by developing a series of workshops for a 3-4 month long process, targeting this specific topic. It is necessary to involve different fields (pedagogy, psychology ect) into the research design to be able to develop a new, creative approach for trauma therapy: design therapy. The target group of the design therapy toolkit should be professionals (social workers, therapists, educators, youth workers, NGOs) working with refugees, immigrants or other populations who experienced the loss of place and home.

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