

Short Social Stories 2: When objects don't fit in

Host, Writer, Producer: Allison Hui

Intro vocals: David McBride

First upload date: 31 July 2013 to Soundcloud

The research upon which this podcast draws was supported by a Hong Kong Baptist University Faculty Research Grant and the David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies. Thanks to Prof. Adrian Bailey and Kelly Li for their assistance with the research and to all participants for their contributions. More information on the project can be found at allisonhui.com/projects.

Think for a moment about the last time you saw an object that was out of place. I'm not just thinking about things that are untidy – like when someone leaves an apple in the middle of a pile of bananas at the grocery store. I'm thinking about times when an object is in completely the wrong context. When its mere presence becomes absurd. Like seeing a snow shovel in the tropics. Or a surfboard in the prairies. These moments might not happen frequently, but they might happen more often than you realize.

Our research project focused upon the objects that Hong Kong people moved and used as they migrated to other countries and later returned. While hearing participants tell their object stories, we learned that migration often leads to things being 'out of place'. The absurdity, however, is not always immediately apparent.

Frances, like many participants who migrated to Canada, was concerned about the cold winter weather, and prepared by purchasing warm clothes. Wool underwear was something she thought that would be perfect to protect her from the cold Canadian prairies. But after getting to Canada, she realized that they were of little use. As she told us, "I didn't need that because it really doesn't fit in the interior where the houses, the buildings are all warmed, has the heating".

The problem is that Frances anticipated the cold weather, but not the infrastructures that take it into account. Hong Kong apartment buildings are often built of concrete, and rarely have built-in heating. When it's cold outside, it's therefore cold inside, and residents cope with warm clothes and occasional space heaters. Canada, by contrast, has very different indoor climates. Central heating, wood framing, and affordable utility prices make it easy to keep indoor temperatures consistent and warm. And in this context, wool underwear become out of place. The infrastructures of everyday practice make it redundant.

The potential usefulness of things like wool underwear can therefore only be realized as part of particular networks of use. Networks of use can be thought of as a collection of objects and people that need to come together in order to support everyday consumption. A mobile phone, for instance, can only be used if it has a sim card activated on a local telephone or wireless network, as well as a charged battery. But when you move to a new country, some parts of these networks cannot move with you, and you need to make new ones after arrival. Going to a new country therefore requires either the purchase of a local sim card or willingness to pay roaming charges, as well as possibly a new plug or adaptor for your phone charger.

The challenge is that often we don't pay very much attention to how we create networks of use in our everyday lives. We become familiar with local infrastructures and begin to take them for granted. Yet when we arrive somewhere else, we might be surprised to find out that the things we have are no longer useful because we didn't anticipate how very different the infrastructures were.

One of the challenges migrants face is learning about local infrastructures, and how they can fit the objects they bring with them into effective networks of use. Sometimes this requires travel adaptors so electronics can be plugged in. Sometimes it requires additional knowledge about local driving laws. But sometimes things can't be made useful. Frances' wool underwear would never be useful indoors in Canada, though they perhaps were for outdoor activities.

In the end then, adapting to life in a new country is not only about social integration. It's also about paying attention to, and learning about, the out of place objects in our midst.