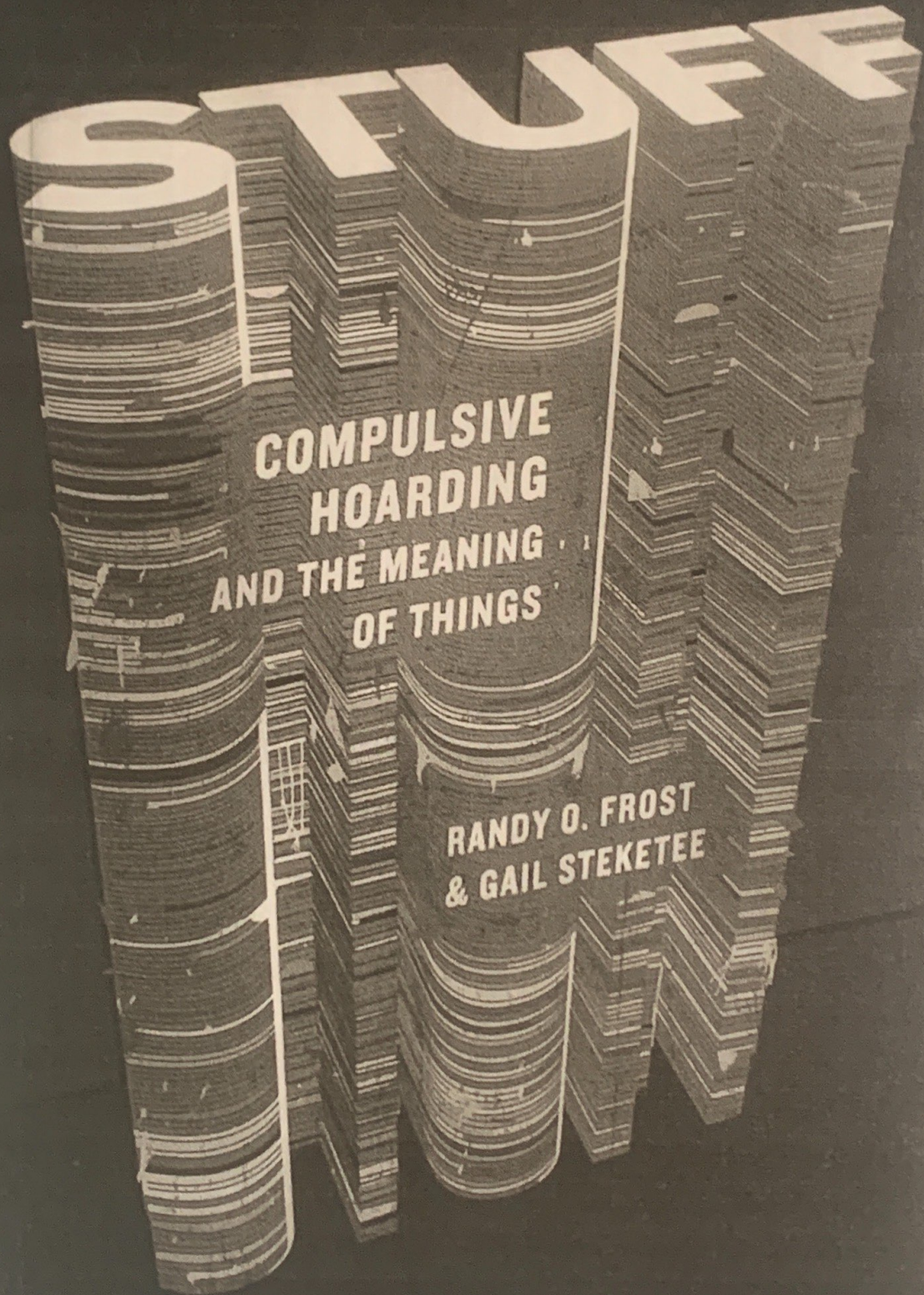


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IS THIS TRUE???

WE ARE WHAT WE OWN

Owning, Collecting, and Hoarding

It is clear that between what a man calls *me* and what he simply calls *mine* the line is difficult to draw. We feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves.

—William James

Significance in experience, emotion.

Recently, I asked the students in my seminar what things they owned that they considered meaningful. One young woman sheepishly admitted that she owned a shirt once worn by Jerry Seinfeld, which she had bought on eBay. All the students agreed that Seinfeld once having worn the shirt gave it value and meaning. Exactly what meaning they couldn't articulate. "But it was worn by Jerry Seinfeld!" was the best they could do.

"But if you didn't know it had been worn by Jerry Seinfeld," I asked, "would it have any special value?"

"No, absolutely not" was the reply.

So the value is in your head and not really in the shirt?"

The students objected, saying that something of the essence of Seinfeld was connected to the shirt, as if he had left some part of himself there, even though the shirt had been laundered.

"Even if this was true, so what? Why would that give it value?" I asked.

"Because then you would be connected to Jerry Seinfeld" was the response.

After class, I thought, *Wasn't this what Irene was doing?* Perhaps she was trying to get connected to the world through her things—and to her, each one of those things was just like Jerry Seinfeld's shirt. They connected her to something bigger than herself. They gave her an expanded identity, a more meaningful life. It wasn't the objects themselves that she valued, but the connections they symbolized. And it's the same whether we collect celebrities' clothing, a piece of the Berlin Wall, a deck chair off the *Titanic*, or five tons of old newspapers. We can't help but imagine that some essence of the person or the event symbolized by the objects will magically rub off and become part of us.

At the end of the nineteenth century, a Scottish anthropologist named Sir James Frazer wrote an influential treatise on "magical thinking" and religion called *The Golden Bough* that shed some light on the lure of possessions. He described two forms of what he called sympathetic magic. According to this thinking, objects are in sympathy if they have properties that resemble each other (similarity) or if they were at one time touching or physically near each other (contagion) (If two things are in sympathy, they have a continued and mutual influence on each other.) The second definition of sympathy, contagion, seems to be at the core of our tendency to see magic in objects such as Jerry Seinfeld's shirt. One study, for example, found that children judged an object that had been touched by the queen of England to be more important than an identical object that had not been touched by her. The first object contained an essence not apparent from its physical characteristics.

→ are the connection we have w/ objects important? or use value?

York City housing law, tenants who fill their apartments with clutter and fail to maintain sanitary conditions are called "Collyer tenants." Collyer tenancy in New York and many other cities across the country has become a significant problem.

Most cases of hoarding are not life threatening, and for those who can afford lots of space or help to manage a hoard, collecting may never reach a crisis level. Most with this problem, however, are left depressed and discouraged by the overwhelming effects hoarding has on their lives. For them, hoarding is certainly pathological. In our work, and indeed in most mental health research, distress and dysfunction are the determining factors as to whether hoarding constitutes a disorder in a particular case. If clutter prevents the person from using his or her living space, and if acquiring and saving cause substantial distress or interference in everyday living, the hoarding is pathological. But exactly what kind of pathology is not clear.

Hoarding has been widely considered to be a subtype of OCD, occurring among one-third of the people diagnosed with that disorder. Interestingly, when we flip it around and study only those who complain of hoarding, only just under one-quarter of them report having OCD symptoms. Recent findings have begun to challenge the view that hoarding is a part of OCD and suggest that hoarding may be a disorder all its own, quite separate from OCD, though sharing some of its characteristics. Classic OCD symptoms are associated with anxiety. The sequence begins with an unwanted intrusive thought (e.g., "My hands are contaminated from touching the doorknob"), followed by a compulsive behavior designed to relieve the distress created by the intrusive thought (e.g., extensive hand washing or cleaning). Positive emotions are not part of this OCD picture; compulsive behavior is driven by the need to reduce distress or discomfort. In hoarding, however, we frequently see positive emotions propelling acquisition and sav-

(A cycle of compulsion & reward)

ing. We see negative emotions in hoarding as well—anxiety, guilt, shame, regret—but these arise almost exclusively from attempts to get rid of possessions and to avoid acquiring new ones.

Other evidence suggests crucial differences between hoarders and people with classic OCD. The genetic linkage studies show a different pattern of (heritability) for OCD than for hoarding. Likewise, brain scans reveal a different pattern of cerebral activation for hoarders. Hoarders don't seem to respond to the same treatments as people with classic OCD symptoms, and they show more severe family and social disability, as well as less insight into the nature of the problem.

In fact, the mixture of pleasure and pain hoarding provides distinguishes it from all of the anxiety and mood disorders. In many ways, hoarding looks like an impulse control disorder (ICD). ICDs are characterized by the inability to resist an urge or impulse even though the behavior is dangerous or harmful. In fact, compulsive buying, a major component of hoarding, is considered to be an ICD, as is kleptomania. Because pathological gambling, like compulsive buying, is classified as an ICD, we wondered whether it, too, would be related to hoarding. To find out, we put an ad in the newspaper looking for people with gambling problems. We found that people with serious gambling problems reported problems with clutter, excessive buying, and difficulty discarding things at much higher rates than people without gambling problems. What may unite these disorders, besides a lack of impulse control, is a psychology of opportunity. One gambler from our study described his experience to me: "Seeing the scratch tickets over the counter at the convenience store leads me to think, *One of those tickets is surely a winner, maybe a million-dollar winner. How can I walk away when the opportunity is there?*" Our hoarders have said similar things about items they've wanted to acquire.

Although the acquisitive features of hoarding look like an ICD,

traces of generational gap?
↳ focus on binary & binary

Another way contagion may influence hoarding has to do not with the desire to be connected to someone or something else, but rather with the fear of being disconnected from a part of oneself. In many early civilizations, people took great pains to make sure that no one gained access to discarded parts of their bodies (e.g., fingernails, hair, teeth) or even pieces of their clothing. According to the laws of sympathetic magic, these items could be used to influence or control the person who lost them. For instance, someone who obtains another person's hair may be able to use it in a magical ceremony to make that person fall in (or out of) love. In some severe cases of hoarding, people show a seemingly irrational fear of discarding anything associated with their bodies, including nail clippings, used tampons, and even feces and urine (see chapter 11). This apparently delusional behavior may reflect magical contagion. Anthropologists consider this kind of thinking a precursor to scientific thought.

explaining the attachment to hoarded items?

Owning

Irene loved only the things she owned or was about to own. Other people's stuff carried no such allure. She liked having her own "treasures" around her, preferably untouched by anyone else. Time and again, we have been struck by the idea that hoarding is not about the objects themselves but about ownership.

To understand hoarding, we must first ask a simple question. What does it mean to own something? It turns out that the answer to this question is not so simple. Philosophers have debated the nature of ownership as far back as Plato in the fourth century B.C.E. Plato was convinced that owning things was a vice to be avoided. He even argued that private ownership should be banned and that all property should be held in common. Aristotle, his stu-

dent, held the opposite view: he believed that individual ownership was essential for the development of moral character. However, he thought that ownership should be reserved only for those who knew how to use the possession. In the thirteenth century, Saint Thomas Aquinas took a middle path and spoke of "stewardship" rather than ownership, whereby people are merely the temporary guardians of God's possessions. In the seventeenth century, John Locke suggested that things should belong only to those who work for them, while a century later David Hume theorized that when we see an object in someone's possession and accept that object as part of that person, we are conveying ownership to the possessor—so ownership is in part defined by social consensus. These philosophers' interest in ownership stemmed from their interest in how society should be structured and economies should be run. It was left to more recent philosophers and social scientists to explore the meaning of ownership from an individual's perspective.

Jean-Paul Sartre insisted that we learn who we are by observing what we own. He argued that ownership of most tangible objects occurs with their acquisition or creation. Actively creating or acquiring the object is key. If something is passively acquired, ownership has to come from mastery over it or intimate knowledge of it. He suggested that ownership extends beyond objects to include intangible things as well. For instance, mastering a skill conveys an ownership of sorts. Also, by knowing something intimately, we come to own it, like a hiker who "knows" every inch of a mountain trail and comes to feel as if he or she "owns" the trail. Reflecting on the meaning of existence, Sartre wrote that "to have" is one of three basic forms of human experience, the other two being "to do" and "to be."

Apart from Sartre, most of the writings about ownership in the twentieth century came from the social and biological sciences. In 1918, psychologist William James described "appropriation" or

"acquisitiveness" as an instinct, something that is part of human nature, present at birth and with us throughout life. This instinct contributes to our sense of self. What is "me" fuses with what is "mine," and our "self" consists of what we possess. The use of instincts to explain behavior was in vogue in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but fell out of fashion for several decades, only to revive again in the past few years thanks to increasingly sophisticated neuroscience research.

It is unclear whether the acquisition of possessions is instinctually or culturally driven, or both. What is clear is that notions of ownership vary widely across cultures, and acquisitive tendencies vary widely within cultures. In some early civilizations, possessions were seen as part of an individual's "life spirit" or self. Anthropologists have proposed this as the basic psychological process for ownership, which can be refined by cultural factors. Among the Manusians, an island tribe in Papua New Guinea described by Margaret Mead in 1930, this belief was readily apparent. They held possessions to be sacred and grieved for things lost as they would for lost loved ones. In contrast, the Tasaday of the Philippines, an isolated culture first discovered in the early 1970s, placed little value on possessions, perhaps because they needed few of them to survive.

By the middle of the twentieth century, psychoanalyst Erich Fromm had developed a theory of character in which he suggested that acquiring things is one way that people relate to the world around them. He believed that acquisition forms a "core" aspect of character. Excessive acquisition, or what Fromm called a "hoarding orientation," is one of four types of "nonproductive" character. People with a hoarding orientation, he thought, gain their sense of security from collecting and saving things. Fromm described people with this orientation as withdrawn, compulsive, suspicious, remote from others, orderly, and overly concerned with cleanliness and punctuality. In his later writings, Fromm posited two contrast-

⇒ Acquire routine

Compare in man's desire?

AVARICE?

extreme greed for
wealth/material
gain.

ing aspects of existence: having and being. Having, or the state of avarice, he claimed, is the most destructive feature of humanity.

Classical psychoanalysts such as Karl Abraham viewed possessions as socially acceptable alternatives to saving excrement — parts of the self these analysts believed every child has the impulse to retain. According to Abraham, the child replaces the desire to retain feces with a more acceptable impulse — to acquire possessions. The more recent object relations school of psychoanalytic thought describes the situation slightly differently. Donald Winnicott introduced the phrase "transitional object" to refer to physical objects to which children form intense attachments as they develop autonomy from their parents. These objects (e.g., blankets, soft toys) are replacements for the mother and form a transition from mother to independence. Early on, the mother is able to soothe the child. At some point, the transitional object takes over that role until the child is old enough to soothe himself or herself. (My own daughter became attached to a blanket she named Mana. Though now in her twenties, she still takes Mana with her whenever she travels.)

Sigmund Freud said little about hoarding, but he did describe a trio of traits he believed result from an anal fixation: orderliness, parsimony, and obstinacy. The parsimony component of the anal triad includes the hoarding of money: miserliness, or stinginess. Langley Collyer seemed to fit at least two of these traits, parsimony and obstinacy, although there is little evidence of his orderliness. Freud saw the hoarding of money as symbolic of fecal retention. Remnants of the "anal triad" can be seen in the current diagnostic criteria for obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD). This disorder, which is distinct from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), also closely fits Fromm's description of people with a "hoarding orientation." For example, one of the eight criteria for OCPD is a preoccupation with details, rules, order, and organization; another is being stingy with money; and a third is being rigid

orderliness =
- excessive concentration
(cleanliness)

parsimony =
- stinginess w. money
& time.

obstinacy =
- being stubborn, inflexible.

Ultimately
subjective

and stubborn. Included among the eight is "the inability to discard worn-out or worthless objects even when they have no sentimental value." Objects in a hoard may appear to be without value to an observer, but someone with a hoarding problem would hardly describe them as worthless.

Only in the past three decades have scientists begun testing these theories with empirical research. Lita Furby, a pioneer researcher in the field of ownership and possessions, studied explanations for the things people own. She found three major themes among people of all ages. The first and most frequent was that possessions allow the owner to do or accomplish something. In other words, possessions provide a sense of personal power or efficacy. Possessions have instrumental value; they are tools to perform tasks. We need things to do things, to exert some control over our environment. This mirrors findings from our earliest study of hoarding, in which both our hoarding and non-hoarding participants said that they owned things because they had uses for them. Virtually all of our hoarding clients make this claim for things they save, but so do people who don't have hoarding problems. The difference between people who hoard and those who don't is in the volume and variety of things they view as "useful." For example, one elderly hoarder saved the labels from cans and jars of food to use as stationery.

Furby's second theme was that possessions provide a sense of security, reminiscent of Winnicott's transitional objects. This theme was also emphasized by Alfred Adler, an analyst who broke with classical psychoanalysis in suggesting that acquiring possessions is one way people compensate for a sense of inferiority created at birth. That inanimate objects can provide comfort was demonstrated by Harry Harlow's classic experiments with infant monkeys, who showed an innate preference for a soft, cloth surrogate mother over a wire-mesh one, even though the wire-mesh

3 major themes of ownership:

1. possessions provide owner to accomplish something / personal power.

2. possessions provide a sense of security.

3. possessions become part of an individual's sense of self.

surrogate provided them with food and the cloth one didn't. When frightened, the monkeys ran to the soft surrogate, demonstrating that the texture of objects can provide comfort and security. Such comfort in objects led Irene to build a fortress of stuff and many of our clients to describe their homes as "cocoon" or "bunkers." One recent theory about hoarding by Stephen Kellett suggests that it evolved from attempts to create and maintain secure living sites, similar to nesting behaviors in animals.

The third major theme identified by Furby was that possessions become part of an individual's sense of self, just as Sartre believed. This kind of attachment can be subtle yet powerful. Objects can increase one's sense of status or power and expand one's potential: my purchase of a piano provides me with the potential to become a pianist, thereby expanding my identity. Objects can also maintain identity by preserving personal history. Most people save mementos of their personal past. These mementos become repositories for the sensations, thoughts, and emotions present during earlier experiences, promoting sensations such as the rush of nostalgia that can accompany hearing a song or smelling a scent from the past.

Collecting

People collect and save objects as a hobby in virtually all cultures. The earliest documented evidence of collecting comes from excavations of the Persian tombs at Ur in what is now Iraq. A collection of eleven hundred seal impressions on lumps of clay found there date to the fifth century B.C.E. In contemporary society, of course, many people collect objects of various types, from antique cars to matchboxes. By one estimate, one-third of adults in the United States collect something, and two-thirds of all households have at least one collector in residence. Some people collect odd