A SOCIAL HISTORY OF HOARDING BEHAVIOR

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by:
Megan Kathleen Shaeffer
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INTRODUCTION

Most people probably know someone whom they fondly refer to as a pack rat, a “clutterbug”, or a hoarder. If they do not, chances are good that they have seen or heard about one of the recently popular television shows or documentaries about hoarding such as The Learning Channel’s (TLC) *Hoarding: Buried Alive* or Arts & Entertainment’s (A&E) *Hoarders*. These shows feature people whose living spaces are piled with items they've bought, found, or saved and simply cannot discard. Oftentimes the people featured on these shows have reached some sort of breaking point which becomes the catalyst for a clean-up: they may be on the verge of losing their children to Child Protective Services because of conditions in the home, the local government may be threatening legal action if the home (and usually the yard) are not cleaned, or a person may be in danger of eviction because of their clutter. While such shows can sensationalize hoarding disorder, they also highlight how detrimental and even dangerous it can be to the health, livelihood, and relationships of the hoarder. Because of this kind of media attention, hoarding behavior has caught the public eye; a good part of the U.S. viewing audience is now aware of a disorder that was almost unheard of only 20 years ago.

In 1996 psychologists Randy O. Frost and Tamara Hartl operationalized hoarding as the acquisition of objects of limited or no value, clutter of the home (yard, workplace, car, etc.) to the point that it becomes unusable, and difficulty discarding items. Hoarders experience significant distress or impairment in relationships and activities because of
their acquisition, clutter, and discard behaviors\(^1\). (Frost and Hartl 1996:341) Cognitively, Frost and Hartl found that hoarders experience problems in decision-making that impede their ability to discard objects. They may have trouble estimating the instrumental or sentimental value of an object or fear making mistakes, which contribute to their indecisiveness. Categorization and organization also seems to be more difficult for hoarders than non-hoarders. Hoarders tend to view each object in their possession as unique and important, making it difficult to categorize and store even similar objects together (e.g. books). Lack of confidence in memory often causes hoarders to keep objects they believe will act as reminders of important people or events. A good example of this can be seen in the hoarding of newspapers and other printed media, which hoarders fear discarding for a loss of the information contained within them. Frost and Hartl (1996) also found that hoarders tend to place greater sentimental value and have more emotional attachment to a wider range of objects than non-hoarders, and that they avoid dealing with their indecisiveness and anxiety by not discarding objects. (Frost and Hartl 1996) Frost and Hartl’s diagnostic criteria have been widely accepted by scholars of the disorder and used in numerous studies on hoarding since the mid-1990s (e.g., Frost and Steketee 1998; Muroff et al 2009a; Maier 2004; Pogosian 2010; Saxena and Maidment 2004; Timpano et al 2009).

Part of the definition of hoarding is subjective. All people own things and all people exhibit the behaviors listed above on a regular basis. Owning “too much” or “too

\(^1\) Throughout this thesis the term “hoarding behaviors” will refer to acquisition, clutter, and difficulty discarding unless otherwise specified.
“little” is in large part culturally defined, as is the necessity to own certain objects and the length of time we should own them. Object ownership can be seen as a continuum that all people occupy, with “normal” people engaging in the behaviors of acquiring and keeping goods to a certain extent. People at either end of the continuum, having too much or too little, are viewed as oddities.

Hoarders occupy one end of this continuum of object ownership, possessing more than they could ever possibly use and accumulating more all the time. As Gail Steketee notes in *Buried in Treasures: Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding*, “the number of possessions is less important in defining hoarding than the extent to which the resulting clutter interferes with the ability to live” (Tolin et al 2007:14). Hoarding seriously and negatively affects quality of life for the hoarder and anyone else in the household. They cannot enjoy or use their living spaces because of the clutter, they often live with poor sanitation and/or hygiene, and their hoarding can interfere in their personal relationships (Steketee and Frost 2007: 9-10). These circumstances are the most noticeable aspects of hoarding, but they belie the true nature of the disorder. Hoarders live with the clutter, the broken or strained relationships, and the squalor because they believe that the stress and anxiety of parting with their objects would be worse. While hoarders may feel their problem isolates them from the social world around them, epidemiological studies show that 2-5% of the population of the United States may be hoarders, a total of up to 15 million people (Mataix-Cols et al 2010:559).

The current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-IV-TR, lists hoarding as a symptom of Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD)
rather than as a discrete disorder. Though not listed specifically in the DSM-IV-TR, research shows that hoarding can be a symptom of many mental health conditions, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), dementia, major depressive disorder, schizophrenia, or bipolar disorder (Frost and Steketee 1998: 533-536; Maier 2004; Steketee and Frost 2007: 8-10). More focus has been placed recently on hoarding as a distinct mental disorder, one that is proposed for inclusion in the upcoming DSM-V. This move takes what has traditionally been seen as a symptom of other disorders and isolates it as a discrete disorder. Hoarding, therefore, is on the brink of medicalization, which will necessarily include a formalized definition of the behavior and its symptoms.

Because of the impending medicalization of the disorder, and because of the current media and public attention being paid to the sufferers of it, this is the ideal time to examine the largely overlooked social factors that affect hoarding behavior. Existing research focuses primarily on psychological constructions and biomedical explanations that drive hoarding behavior. In this thesis I examine how the behaviors that drive hoarding were socially constructed in our collective past and maintained over time. I will show that the behaviors typically viewed as symptoms of hoarding are socially appropriate, encouraged, and shared behaviors for virtually all members of U.S. society. How and why we acquire things, how we construct our things meaningfully in the spaces we occupy, and why we keep things: these motivations are socially rooted in our history, which affects our current behaviors toward material culture. The perspective offered in this thesis is timely and relevant, as it adds another facet to our understanding of why people hoard.
METHODOLOGY

At this point it will be useful to clarify what my research is and what it is not. While I make use of many secondary sources that refer to historic human activity, this thesis is not a history of consumerism or collecting, nor is it a history of hoarding disorder. Instead, it is a sociological study of the context of the behaviors that relate to hoarding disorder. As Foucault points out in the preface of *Madness and Civilization* (1965), “we must try to return, in history, to that zero point in the course of madness at which madness is an undifferentiated experience, a not yet divided experience of division itself” (p. ix). Foucault was speaking of how insanity and sanity were historically constructed and differentiated. His aim was to understand “the action that divides madness, not the science elaborated once that division is made” (Foucault 1965:ix). In the same vein I examine a point in time where the drive to acquire and keep objects was not yet divided into healthy or unhealthy levels. My aim is to understand how each hoarding behavior—acquisition, clutter, and retention of objects—has been vigorously promoted in U.S. culture and consequently has become embedded in our collective conscience. The social framework of this set of behaviors can be used in further research to understand how and why the confluence of these three socially acceptable behaviors in excess can lead to a diagnosis of a socially marginalizing disorder: hoarding.

Before delving into the historic sources, an examination of sociological theoretical views on material culture is provided, as is an outline of the past and present views on hoarding disorder. Theoretically, hoarding has not been explored in sociology,
at least in the modern sense as a specific disorder. The relationship between people, behavior, and objects has been treated, however, by many of the most influential theorists in the discipline. Exploring hoarding in terms of its constitutive behaviors allows me to incorporate the theoretical work of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, William James, Thorstein Veblen, and Georg Simmel into a discussion of the disorder that is normally reserved for psychology. The overview of hoarding disorder in the past and present shows the progression within psychology of conceptualizing hoarding as an atypical symptom of a mental disorder (such as dementia or schizophrenia) to the current view that hoarding is a disorder in and of itself that may affect millions of people.

My primary focus is the construction of a social history of hoarding behaviors. The temporal focus of my research is on the time period from the mid 1800s through the present day. The foundation for how people in modern Western societies (and increasingly in non-Western societies) view objects and ownership was laid during this period. This 150 year period encompasses the development of the capitalist economy during the Industrial Revolution (late 1700s - mid 1800s), the emergence and maintenance of the industrialized society of the modernist period (mid 1800s - 1930s), and the globalized social and economic culture of the postmodern period (1930s - present). In the interests of clarity and brevity, the focus in each section is on periods or decades when attitudinal changes or trends regarding each behavior took place. Geographically, I concentrate on the United States with some references to Western Europe, particularly Great Britain. These areas of the world were the epicenter of the Industrial Revolution and its accompanying attitudinal changes toward material culture.
One of the more challenging aspects of my research on hoarding behaviors has been deciding how to connect larger social trends to a disorder which is exhibited at the individual level. The answer came through my own research on social attitudes toward household waste and on the social construction of illness. Writing about waste disposal practices, Krogman discusses how macro, meso, and micro-level sociological analyses can be used together to give a fuller social context from the institutional policies to the individual behaviors (2005). Similarly, Brown (1995) points out that the consequences of social policies regarding health care can be better understood by looking at health and illness across these three levels (p. 37). As I considered the behaviors associated with acquisition, clutter, and retention of objects, I realized that each section would lend itself to both a general time period and level of analysis. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the time periods and levels of analysis I use in the discussion of hoarding behaviors. My approach is not to suggest that the development of the behaviors studied here occurred in a strictly linear trajectory with no temporal overlap, but rather to identify periods when trends relating to current U.S. and/or western attitudes toward objects became prominent.

Figure 1: Time periods and levels of analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macro (Structural)</th>
<th>Meso (Social Practices)</th>
<th>Micro (Individual)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Acquisition: Consumerism</td>
<td>Clutter: The Home &amp; Collecting</td>
<td>Difficulty Discarding: Waste &amp; Reuse, Objects &amp; Identity</td>
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<td>1850</td>
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In discussing acquisition I show how it was transformed through social means into consumerism during the 1800s at the institutional or macro-level. The development of the middle class and access to luxury goods through shopping (especially the mid to late 1800s) is discussed, as are the socially constructed meanings and values given to objects through advertising, literature, and other media. The section on clutter concentrates on social practices, a meso-level of analysis. How people relate to the things they own, what ownership means, and how people value their possessions is examined here. The use of objects to create a home space from the mid 1800s through the mid 1900s is explored, as is the rise of hobbies and collecting in the 1930s. At the micro or individual level, difficulty discarding is examined through the acts of saving, storing, and curating possessions as well as the avoidance of discarding objects. I also discuss the industries of storing, saving, and organizing which arose in the late 1900s through the present and which promote consumerism through such products as storage units and services such as those provided by professional organizers.

The behaviors to be examined, as noted above, are: acquisition, clutter (of the home, workplace, or yard), and difficulty discarding. Literature discussing aspects of acquisition, clutter, and saving is available in multiple disciplines, ranging from history to economics to anthropology. I make use of this wealth of secondary sources, placing them inside a sociological framework which focuses specifically on how these behaviors relate to hoarding. My selection of sources does not cover all aspects of the above behaviors; I looked only at the aspects related to hoarding. This research will be conducted with the potential issues of bias and accuracy taken into consideration for all sources, and with an
acknowledgement that literature from other disciplines is not written with the sociologist or her intentions in mind. Works on social history such as Blaszczyk’s 2009 *American Consumer Society, 1865-2005: From Hearth to HDTV*, Bronner’s (ed.) 1989 *Consuming Visions*; Strasser’s 1999 *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*; and Glickman’s (ed.) 1999 *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* provide insight on the historical trends of the behaviors studied in this thesis. Works such as Pearce’s 1998 *Collecting in Contemporary Practice*, and Fisher and Shipton’s 2010 *Designing for Reuse* examine the role that behaviors associated with acquisition, clutter, and discard play in both everyday life and in our place within our social groups. The human social relationship to material culture is explored in works such as Appadurai’s (ed.) *The Social Life of Things* and Pearce’s (ed.) *Experiencing Material Culture in the Western World*. Using this diverse assortment of sources, in the sections on each of the behaviors associated with hoarding I discuss the historic underpinnings of said behavior and the modern sensibility that shapes it today.
MATERIAL CULTURE AND THEORY

It would be accurate to say that the rapidly changing relationship of humans to their material culture from the late 1700s was one of the driving forces of the creation of many fields of social science, including sociology, political science, and economics. The Industrial Revolution raised questions about how objects and people operated in a newly developing capitalist market economy. The work of Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, William James, Emile Durkheim, and Thorstein Veblen tackled issues of value, exchange, production, meaning, and identity. Thus, while hoarding may not be specifically explored in sociology, hoarding behaviors (being behaviors that link humans and material culture experience) have been examined and explained as factors in social movements and relationships. Theoretical groundwork does exist in sociology which can be used to understand hoarding.

Writing in the mid-1800s, Karl Marx commented on the link between people and the objects they owned. Marx saw a natural relationship between human labor and the result of that labor. Industrialization separated the laborer from his or her labor and degraded his or her spirit, thus the market economy and capitalism threw the working class person, or proletariat, out of balance. Importantly, Marx saw that the value of the commodity that human labor produced was not determined by the usefulness of that object (the use-value), but by its relation to the mode of production (the exchange value). In a market economy, in other words, acquisition of an object by a person is determined by more factors than utilitarian need. (Marx 1964:147, 171-173) Objects can have value...
beyond their use (money). Marx also discusses the human-object relationship. He viewed the transformation and objectification of nature as part of the human experience, saying that “[e]very alienation of man from himself and from Nature appears in the relation which he postulates between other men and himself and Nature” (Marx 1964:169).

In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James addressed how humans interact with the material culture that surrounds them. The material self is the first component of the self in James’ theory; it pertains to the physical body and the trappings in which that body is placed. James believed that objects connect to a sense of self which has to do with the body and mind of a person and the things people call their own. People associate the things they own with themselves, and preferences for objects are “instinctive preferences coupled with the most important practical interests of life” (James 1890:292). Objects become material representations of what humans perceive as the inner reality of self. They also physically shape people, how they present that self in the world, as well as their opportunities, abilities, and obligations.

Emile Durkheim discusses the relationship between material goods and human life in *Suicide* (1897), noting that beyond basic physical needs, the quantity of objects necessary for sustaining life is subjective. “But how determine the quantity of well-being, comfort, or luxury to be craved by a human being?” Durkheim asks. “Nothing appears in man’s organic nor in his psychological constitution which sets a limit to such tendencies” (1897: p. 247). An unlimited desire for the pleasures afforded by material goods sets an unattainable goal (infinite material goods) and thus causes mental torment.
Morals become the external force which can place limits on human passion and want, and society is the vehicle of those morals (Durkheim 1897: 249). This begs the question: what happens when the increasing desire for objects becomes socially and morally acceptable?

At the turn of the 20th century, Thorstein Veblen observed that conspicuous consumption in the United States played an important role in people’s lives in terms of their status and identity. According to Veblen, objects have manifest and latent functions, both of which motivate people to acquire them. (Berger 2009:70-71) The manifest function of a bicycle or automobile in the late 1800s, for example, is that it provides transportation that is faster and easier than the horse-drawn carriage. Objects also enhance one’s sense of self and signal inclusion in a certain social class, which can be as important as the object’s manifest function. The social function of a bicycle in the late 1800s, for example, is that it shows one’s membership to a more fashionable, forward-thinking kind of middle-class. It also allows for independent mobility and increased social integration in both towns and the countryside (Bronner 1989:32-36).

Possessing certain objects was an indication that one had attained a certain standard of living. No one could remain satisfied with their standard for long, as Veblen points out that “the tendency…is constantly to make the present pecuniary standard the point of departure for a fresh increase of wealth; and this in turn gives rise to a new standard of sufficiency and a new pecuniary classification of one’s self as compared with one’s neighbors” (Veblen 1912: 31). The desire for the status afforded by objects and the rapidly growing economy of the United States thus bolstered one another.
Georg Simmel also viewed fashion as a means by which people express themselves and create social ties at the same time. Though it is often viewed as a way of showing individuality, Simmel believed that the adoption of fashionable clothing, mannerisms, or objects is a way of garnering both the approval and the envy of one’s social class. The hallmark of fashion is that it is distinct and exclusive. (Simmel 2003:238-239) As soon as it is widely adopted by most people in a social group or class, a style ceases to be fashionable, necessitating the introduction of new styles. Fashion, then, plays an important part in group relations and affects economic demand. Simmel points out that “[t]he more an article becomes subject to rapid changes of fashion, the greater the demand for cheap products of its kind” (Simmel 2003:245).

Simmel also took into account how rapid industrialization had changed the character of not only supply and demand but of the social classes as well. Producing larger quantities and varieties of goods for lower prices meant the poorer and lower classes were more likely to be able to afford them. Even the lower classes could create appearance of fashionable modernity as they became a group with purchasing power than influenced economic growth. The more rapid and widespread adoption of fashion by the lower classes only pushed objects or styles out of fashion more quickly, thus the middle and upper classes felt more pressure to innovate and produce new fashions to keep pace with this process. Economic and industrial growth had (and still have) intimate ties to social identity and relationships. (Simmel 2003:245)
HOARDING AS A DISORDER: PAST AND PRESENT VIEWS

Hoardings: A Historic Context of a Disorder-in-the-Making

Some psychological theorists address the human capacity to acquire too many objects, linking it to certain personality traits. Sigmund Freud and Erich Fromm both describe characteristics of the hoarder. In their views, personality can be understood through a person’s interaction with material culture: how one treats objects is seen as a marker of inner traits. Their characterizations bear little resemblance to the hoarder as described in modern literature, but it helps show the importance of the human/object relationship in early psychological literature.

In his work on psychosexual development, Sigmund Freud considered the act of hoarding to arise from the anal stage of psychosexual development, occurring when a child reached one or two years of age. During this stage, a child might become anally retentive, which would translate later in his or her personality as the anal triad of orderliness, parsimony, and obstinacy. According to Freud, an anally retentive child would grow to be an obsessively controlling and withholding adult, which could lead to possessiveness of objects. (Millon et al 2001:49)

Psychologist Erich Fromm built on Freud’s character types. According to Fromm (1947), the hoarding orientation is one of the non-productive types of character, along with the receptive, exploitative, and marketing character orientations. In Fromm’s breakdown, the hoarder has a miserly disposition and places importance on possessing both the tangible (clothing, cars, money) and the intangible (the love of others, memories
of bygone days) (1947:65-66). Acquiring and saving objects creates a secure, fortified position for the hoarding character, who views the outside world with suspicion and fear (Fromm 1947:65-67). Hoarders are overly sentimental about memories and idealize the past. Some of the characteristics of the hoarder that Fromm outlines are similar to those found in individuals with obsessive-compulsive disorders: obsession with order, compulsive cleaning of the body and surroundings, and fanatic punctuality. “Things beyond his own frontiers are felt to be dangerous and ‘unclean’; he annihilates the menacing contact by compulsive washing, similar to a religious washing ritual prescribed after contact with unclean things or people” (Fromm 1947:66).

Hoarding is mentioned only rarely in psychological literature until the 1990s. The 1966 article “Hamburger Hoarding: A Case of Symbolic Cannibalism Resembling Whitico Psychosis” by Bolman and Katz is sometimes cited in the current literature on hoarding as the first time the term “hoarding” was applied to “describe a psychopathological phenomenon in an anecdotic case report” (Maier 2004: 323). The case described by the authors was a schizophrenic woman who hoarded meat, particularly raw hamburger, an act the authors called one of the more “unusual and bizarre symptoms and behaviors” associated with schizophrenia (Bolman and Katz 1966: 424). The explanation for hoarding behavior in this article represents a departure from the character depictions given by Freud and Fromm. Here, hoarding is viewed as a symptom of an underlying psychological disorder rather than as a personality flaw.

There are some references to hoarding behavior in scholarly works prior to the Bolman and Katz 1966 article. A 1927 article titled “The Present Status of the Tendency
to Collect and Hoard” by Lehman and Witty discusses children’s collecting and hoarding activity, while “Ideas of Neglect and Hoarding in the Senile Psychoses” by Reimer (1940) looks at the behavior in the elderly. In his 1963 article “Collector’s Mania,” Jensen describes what would today be classified as hoarding behavior as a mania quite different from the more “scientific” or “rational” collecting of art or books (p.606). In the 1975 Clark and his colleagues identified a disorder they termed Diogenes syndrome among elderly patients in the U.K. This syndrome was marked by extreme self-neglect, poor health and vitamin deficiencies, and, in many cases, the hoarding of trash (Clark et al 1975).

Compulsive hoarding as a discrete disorder came into the spotlight in the mid 1990s, particularly with the work of R.O. Frost and his colleagues. In 1996, Frost and Hartl published “A Cognitive–Behavioral Model of Compulsive Hoarding,” a seminal piece that defines what is today considered to be hoarding disorder (as described above in the Introduction). Since the 1990s, numerous articles, papers, and books have been published on hoarding, largely in psychology. Hoarding became a mental disorder in itself as well as a symptom of a number of other mental disorders such as depression and OCD. Another factor affecting scholarly views on hoarding came with the publication of the DSM-IV in 1994. The Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale (Y-BOCS) was used in the field trials for the manual and became an increasingly popular tool in diagnosing OCD. The Y-BOCS is a symptom checklist used to determine the type and severity of obsessions and compulsions that affect a person; included on this checklist are
two items relating to obsessions and compulsions that lead to hoarding objects. (Mataix-Cols et al 2010:2) Hoarding became recognized as a symptom of OCPD in the DSM-IV.

Since the mid-1990s, other scales rating OCD as well as hoarding have been devised, such as the Obsessive-Compulsive Inventory-Revised (OCI-R); the National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization’s (NSGCD) Clutter-Hoarding Scale; the Saving Inventory-Revised; the Hoarding Rating Scale; the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) Hoarding Severity Scale; and the Clutter Image Scale. Such a proliferation of diagnostic tools indicates increasing scholarly recognition of hoarding, which has been mirrored by public interest in the behavior. Hoarders and their loved ones are seeking treatment, and, thanks to growing media attention, non-hoarders have become fascinated by the disorder. Hoarding has become highly visible through shows such as Hoarders: Buried Alive and websites such as Children of Hoarders and Squalor Survivors. The media has brought attention to hoarding behavior, providing more information and resources to those seeking treatment, but it has also sensationalized hoarding, making a spectacle of those whom it affects.

Treatments for hoarding have also been developed since the mid-1990s, most involving either the use of drugs to control hoarding obsessions and compulsions, intense

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2 Defined in the Y-BOCS as “unwelcome and distressing ideas, thoughts, images or impulses that repeatedly enter your mind. They may seem to occur against your will. They may be repugnant to you, you may recognize them as senseless, and they may not fit your personality.” (Goodman et al 1989)

3 Defined in the Y-BOCS as “behaviors or acts that you feel drive to perform although you may recognize them as senseless or excessive. At times you may try to resist doing them but this may prove difficult. You may experience anxiety that does not diminish until the behavior is completed.” (Goodman et al 1989)
cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), or both (a complete list can be found in Muroff 2011). Muroff et al’s (2011) comprehensive assessment of hoarding treatments found that the most effective were “individually delivered CBT following the models and methods of Drs. Steketee (social work) and Frost (psychology)” (p. 420).

**On the Brink of Medicalization?**

The current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-IV-TR*, lists hoarding as a symptom of OCPD, or Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder. As the publication of the DSM-V approaches, there is increasing debate over whether or not hoarding should be included as a discrete disorder. The potential inclusion of hoarding (and by necessity the definition of its symptoms) in the DSM-V would place hoarding within a wider dialogue about the medicalization and deviant behavior.

Hoarding disorder is currently a proposed revision for the DSM-V. Criteria as recommended in Mataix-Cols et al (2010) for recognizing the disorder include difficulty discarding or parting with possessions regardless of actual value and strong urges and/or distress associated with discarding objects. The hoarder will have an extensive accumulation of possessions in the home or workplace (such that the intended use of these spaces is no longer possible). This accumulation and clutter will cause “clinically significant distress or impairment” interfering with the patient’s life and/or relationships (Mataix-Cols et al 2010:558). Finally, the symptoms will not be due to another medical condition, such as brain injury.
There is recognition in the proposed DSM-V definition that hoarding behavior appears in several other disorders, ranging from Axis I (clinical disorders such as depression and schizophrenia), Axis II (personality disorders such as OCPD and paranoid personality disorder), and Axis III (acute medical conditions or physical disorders such as brain injury). For a practitioner to diagnose hoarding disorder it must be apparent that the behavior is not a symptom of another disorder, which presents the potential problem of diagnosis through the process of elimination. Another aspect of the proposed definition of hoarding worth noting is that excessive accumulation and level of insight are left as specifiers of the disorder rather than criteria. This specifier places emphasis on the clutter and the difficulty in discarding rather than the process of accumulation, which is a departure from the widely accepted 1996 Frost and Hartl definition of hoarding.

There is already a considerable literature discussing the phenomenon of medicalization and, as part of this process, labeling certain behaviors as “deviant” or “normal.” In the 1960s and 1970s, researchers such as Scheff (1974), Rosenhan (1973), and Szasz (1960) suggested that deviant acts, particularly deviant mental states, are viewed as deviant because they break some societal norm. The deviance, according to Labeling Theory, depends on the norm. Szasz (1960) characterized the diagnosis of mental illness as a matter of categorizing a person’s “communications about himself, others, and the world about him” (emphasis original; p. 114) according to “certain psychosocial, ethical, or legal norms” (p. 115). The definition of mental illnesses thus depends upon a social context. Despite their apparent (and important) social
underpinnings, once labeled as such, mental illnesses are often subject to medical treatments.

Brown (1995) and Conrad (2007) both point out that medicalization is not simply the imposition of criteria defining medical conditions by authoritative physicians, but a process involving the interplay of multiple claimsmakers: doctors, patients, pharmaceutical companies, the media, and insurance groups, to name a few. In the social construction of an illness, the claimsmakers shape our knowledge of medical facts and our perception of our mental and physical health (Brown 1995:37). Medicalization shifts attention away from social factors that affect behaviors and on to the individual. Symptoms become markers of individual mental or physical disorders and diseases rather than valid reactions to existing social conditions. According to Conrad and Schneider (1992), “[w]e tend to look for causes and solutions to complex social problems in the individual rather than in the social system…we ignore the possibility that the behavior is not an illness but an adaptation to a social situation” (p. 250).

With the medicalization of hoarding, we can see a number of claimsmakers already at work. The media has certainly shaped the public view of hoarding through dramatic television, magazine, book, online, and newspaper depictions of hoarders. Self-help books and websites on organizing and containing clutter are available to anyone who believes they are or may become a hoarder. A simple keyword search on “hoarding” on Amazon.com in January of 2012 yielded 304 books and 10 DVDs available on the subject. These search results included books like Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things (Steketee and Frost 2011); Buried in Treasures: Help for Compulsive
Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding (Tolin et al 2007); Overcoming Compulsive Hoarding: Why You Save and How You Can Stop (Bubrick et al 2004); and Digging Out: Helping Your Loved One Manage Clutter, Hoarding, and Compulsive Acquiring (Tompkins and Hartl 2009). Interestingly, a number of the authors of the scholarly works cited in this thesis (Steketee, Tolin, Frost, and Hartl, for example) also turn up as authors of popular health or self-help books about hoarding. This may be an example of medical and psychological scholars and practitioners using the media to disseminate information to the public about a previously little-known but serious mental disorder. It may also be an example of the convergence of the interests of three sets of claimmakers: medical practitioners, scholars, and the media.

One of the most important underlying forces of medicalization in recent decades is the pharmaceutical industry. Most studies on the effectiveness of medication on hoarding outcomes show that hoarders had equivalent or worse outcomes than non-hoarding OCD sufferers (Muroff et al 2011:418–420). Few studies, however, have been done measuring the effectiveness of pharmacotherapy on non-OCD hoarders, a fact which will likely change if hoarding is included as its own disorder in the DSM-V. Since the 1997 change in advertising regulations which have eased the requirements to list all risks and side effects associated with a drug, the pharmaceutical industry has relentlessly used print and broadcast media to promote its products directly to consumers (Conrad 2007:17). As such, it has become a major player in the medicalization of a number of disorders, from social anxiety disorder (SAD) to erectile dysfunction (ED). Drugs such as Prozac and Viagra have been developed, prescribed, and reaped billions of dollars of
profit as a result of the medicalization process. Considering the high profile hoarding now enjoys and the legitimacy it will be afforded through inclusion in the DSM-V, there is every reason to believe that drugs specifically for the treatment of hoarding will be developed and marketed.
HOARDING AS A BEHAVIOR

Most research into the subject notes three behaviors that combine to create the compulsive hoarder: acquisition\(^4\), clutter of the home (yard, workplace, car, etc.), and difficulty discarding items (Frost and Hartl 1996). In extreme excess, these three behaviors cause considerable distress, impede normal usage of the cluttered area, and interfere with social relationships. The sense of obligation the hoarder feels toward the stewardship of his or her objects is reminiscent of Marx’s concept of objectification, in which objects are a physical embodiment of alienated labor. In objectification is a sense of “loss and…servitude to the object,” and in the acquisition of objects is a further sense of alienation (emphasis original; Marx 1964:171). Cases of hoarding show us how that feeling of servitude to objects can alienate the hoarder from family and friends, isolating them within a world of material culture.

When not in extreme excess, however, all of these behaviors—acquisition, clutter, and failure to throw things out—are normal behaviors in which all people in modern society engage to some degree. Although sociology and psychology most often focus the intangibles of individual motivation or social constructions, it is important to remember that all humans live in a world of material culture in which objects are imbued with meaning and used actively. An object in and of itself may be inanimate, but the social

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\( ^4 \) Although acquisition is recommended as a specifier rather than a criterion of hoarding for the DSM-V, it is often recognized in research as an important component to hoarding behavior. It is treated as such here as well.
meaning(s) and value(s) attributed to it make it part of a dynamic cultural discourse.

Objects can be markers of status, tokens of emotion, or symbols of obligation. To have can mean prestige and wealth, to have not can mean social degradation and relative poverty. In other words, the things we acquire and keep are important to us, whether we are hoarders or not. How and why we acquire things, how we construct our things meaningfully in the spaces we occupy, and why we keep things: these behaviors are socially rooted in a historic context.

What follows here is a short discussion of the human-object link followed by an examination of the historic underpinnings and the modern motivation of these three behaviors: acquisition, clutter, and difficulty discarding. In each section I will also discuss why they might become excessive or distorted in some people. Difficulty discarding will encompass both the cultural mechanisms that push us toward saving non-essential items and the factors which might make getting rid of objects so distressful for some people (to a seemingly disproportionate degree in hoarders). Understanding how these behaviors have been encouraged (cultivated, in fact) can help us understand why hoarding is associated with so many mental disorders, why it may stand alone as its own disorder, and why there appears to be such a range of hoarding focus and severity.

The Human-Object Link

Before discussing the development of the behaviors associated with hoarding in modern and post-modern western culture, a few words about the human-object link are in order. Lest the reader believe that either the average consumer or the hoarder are freaks
of nature who attach far too much meaning or emotion to material objects, it is important
to remember the integral part that material culture has played in human physical, mental,
and social evolution. Evolutionary biologist Lewis Wolpert (2006) argues that tool-
making was a socially cooperative enterprise and that it required an understanding of
cause and effect. Causal thinking would be necessary to understand how two very
different pieces, a shaft of wood and a blade, could be brought together to form a hafted
tool. The separate pieces also serve different purposes in one tool, with the wooden shaft
serving as a handle and the blade as the cutting edge. The connection between brain,
hand, and external object had a profound effect on human evolution. (Wolpert 2006:76-
78) According to Wolpert, “this relationship could have promoted human consciousness,
as the manipulation of objects became a self-conscious activity; once the individual
becomes an agent operating on external objects in numerous different ways, causal
beliefs are involved” (2006:77-78). Tool use, combined with a social nature and a
complex system of communication (i.e. language), formed the basis of human culture.

Another important point is that humans have always been fascinated with the rare,
strange, exotic, or technically superb since they have been manipulating objects into
tools. All societies place value on objects, and non-necessary luxuries are nothing new
(Belk 1995:2). Archaeologists and historians have long understood that there is a link
between objects and human social and individual identities and have used their respective
disciplines to uncover the meanings of objects to their original users and thus better
understand the peoples of the past.
Igor Kopytoff points out that this is the process of creating the “biography of a thing” (1986:66). To create this biography, we must ask the same kinds of questions we might ask when constructing the biography of a person. By determining the social or cultural status of a thing, how its use or function changes over time and from culture to culture, and what happens to a thing at the end of its “career,” we understand not the thing, but the people who use it. The biography reveals “a tangled mass of aesthetic, historical, and even political judgments, and …convictions and values that shape [a people’s] attitudes” (Kopytoff 1986:67). These biographies are present throughout the history of the human species, for as long as we have been manipulating the world around us and creating material culture.

Our connection to material culture is one of the defining characteristics of humanity. The examples given above show that to understand the way modern humans interact with objects we must not overlook human behavior prior to the 18th century. As this is a study on hoarding, however, I am concerned with not just any and all human-object relationships, but with the behaviors associated with that phenomenon. Now I ask, at what point in human history did the modern human-object relationship begin to develop into the specific behaviors that we now associate with hoarding?

**Acquisition**

Though the drive to obtain objects is nothing new, modern trends in the acquisition of goods may be most closely associated with the rise of consumerism observed from the later 1800s and into the 1900s. Rapid economic, technological, and
manufacturing advancements will be collectively referred to here as the Industrial
Revolution; one of the key features of the Industrial Revolution was a rise in
consumerism: people began acquiring goods in vast quantities and varieties. Throughout
most of human history conspicuous consumerism was reserved for the elite, the wealthy
upper classes of a society. During this period the human relationship with material
culture was emphasized as never before and people of all social classes, particularly the
emerging middle class, were affected by this emphasis. Being part of a particular class
was not just based on birthright, but on the acquisition and display of the material culture
associated with that class. Because of increased manufacturing output, access to cheaper
natural resources, and technological innovations, acquiring the correct “assemblage” of
goods to convey a certain social status and a particular personal identity became a
realistic goal for many middle or even lower class individuals.

To understand this better, let us first examine changes in how people shopped in
the United States. Even during the first part of the Industrial Revolution, shopping was a
pastime for the higher classes to enjoy and a chore for the lower classes to endure
(Blaszczyk 2009:73). Goods were not displayed for people to examine or compare, they
were kept in stock and brought out for paying customers (Bronner 1989:26). Stores were
often small, cramped, and specialized, their stock limited (Blaszczyk 2009:73-74;
Bronner 1989 26). While these kinds of shops did not disappear during the later 1800s,
other types of stores emerged to give shoppers much more opportunity for consumerism.
Here I will discuss the emergence of the department store, the five-and-ten, and the mail-
order catalogue.
The most extravagant new stores were the luxury department stores like Wanamaker’s in Philadelphia, Marshall Field’s in Chicago, and R. H. Macy & Company in New York. Entrepreneurs like Alexander T. Stewart and John Wanamaker erected enormous, spacious stores and filled them with not only goods but amenities. In 1862 Stewart built the Cast Iron Palace in New York City. This shopping space was large and airy, decorated in exotic oriental motifs designed to excite the imagination of the customer (Lears 1989:77). Wanamaker’s store, opened in 1877, featured parlors, retiring rooms, 129 counters, and 1,400 stools for his shoppers (Bronner 1989:28). Though they carried a wide range of goods, the main emphasis in these new kinds of stores was on household goods. According to Blaszczyk, this “transformed shopping from a wifely duty into a mechanism by which women refined their tastes and expanded their visions of the good life. The department store facilitated a woman’s transition from a homemaker to a consumer” (2009:76).

At the other end of the spectrum, five-and-tens emerged to accommodate the lower classes and the working poor. Five-and-ten stores operated as chains with a centralized office purchasing the merchandise to sell in bulk, which allowed them to keep their prices very low. Immigrant groups and ethnic or racial minority groups were particularly enthusiastic customers of these stores (Blaszczyk 2009:79-80). Although they were often relegated to the least appealing jobs and worst living conditions in urban America, stores like Woolworth’s (which began in 1879 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania) and Kresge’s (which began in 1899 in Detroit) gave these groups the opportunity raise their quality of life, at least in terms of material culture. Consumption allowed them to
identify themselves with the standard of living in a new country or social class.
Economically, immigrants and ethnic minorities might be part of the lowest classes, but low cost goods allowed them to improve their social standing through their material culture. (Blaszczyk 2009:79-82; Heinze 1999:190-191, 195)

Equally important to the range of goods available in both the luxury department store and the five-and-ten was the atmosphere in which they were purchased. At the large department stores consumers could listen to music while they browsed at their leisure and could buy goods without the pressure of haggling over prices (Blaszczyk 2009:76). At five-and-tens customers could see and touch the goods on display as they shopped through the aisles (Blaszczyk 2009:81). Department stores and five-and-tens alike offered colorful window displays to entice customers. At stores such as Macy’s in New York the window displays became a point of pride and a source of entertainment and attraction for passersby (Blaszczyk 2009:82-84).

While consumption and shopping was changing in urban America, mail-order catalogs made a wealth of good available to rural Americans as well. The two most popular mail-order houses in the late 1800s and early 1900s were Montgomery Ward, started in 1872 and Sears, Roebuck and Company, started in 1887. The institution of the one-cent advertiser’s postcard in 1871, the rural free delivery service in 1898, and the rural parcel-post system in 1913 all helped to make the mail-order shopping experience extremely successful in rural America (Schlereth 1989:369). By the early 1900s, Sears was sending out over a million catalogs per year, and according to Blaszczyk, “[b]etween 1902 and 1908 it circulated more than 24 million catalogs, or one for every three to four
people in America” (2009:89). Customers could purchase anything from furniture to farm equipment to house plans through the mail. Mail-order catalogs were dubbed “a department store in a book,” “a consumer guide,” “the world’s largest country store,” and “the nation’s largest supply house,” all titles which indicate their importance to the non-urban shopper.

Perhaps the most important vehicle for imparting socially constructed meanings onto objects was (and still is) through the use of advertising. The first advertising agency in the United States was N.W. Ayer & Son in Philadelphia in 1869, and others soon followed to take advantage of the proliferation of print media being distributed at the time. Magazines and newspapers informed and entertained the public, and by 1900 around 3,500 magazines alone were being produced in the United States (Blaszczyk 2009:116). National magazines were the perfect way to promote products to a large segment of the population, and the concept of national branding was developed by companies like Coca-Cola, Johnson & Johnson, and The National Biscuit Company (Nabisco). Brands “emerged in the trial-and-error quest for national markets during the late 1800s” as a way to catch the consumer’s eye and make products memorable to shoppers (Blaszczyk 2009:117). Advertisements were a way of showing consumers how products could offer them a better life and better social standing as well. In the late 1800s, for example, advertisements for bicycles featured young, middle class men and women enjoying these vehicles. Businesses like Sears, Roebuck and Company emphasized that bicycles were a fashionable status symbol, “in short, pushing an object ‘everybody else has’ or should want” (Bronner 1989:35). Advertisers helped to establish
the link between objects, brands, and personal identity, a link that strongly influences what we buy today, hoarders or not.

The brief history I have given here of shopping in the mid to late 1800s in the United States serves to illustrate how the relationship between people and their objects was changing throughout this time period. Not only did objects become more accessible and much easier to acquire, but it became easier to link objects with identity. Middle or upper-class membership could be signaled through ownership and display of the right kinds of things, like a bicycle, an automobile, or a sewing machine. The relationship between people and the process of acquiring objects was changing as well. Shopping came to serve social purposes as well as material needs. The act of shopping itself was refashioned into a pleasurable experience that almost anyone from any class could enjoy in some way. The new patterns of consumption introduced in the 1800s changed the way goods were advertised and the way stores were organized, but more than this, the new standards of commerce that emerged were incorporated into American culture. “These standards found symbolic extension in custom, literature, art, and even city planning…As consumers participating in new economic and social patterns, Americans embraced new ways of living, seeing, and thinking” (Bronner 1989:29).

Acquiring objects and hoarding have been associated with one another in literature on hoarding since the 1990s. In this section I have examined how the drive to acquire goods has been socially encouraged and how the very act of acquisition was made into a pastime to be enjoyed. Shopping, buying, displaying, and taking pride in the ownership of goods are activities that virtually all members of U.S. society take part in,
and have been since the later 1800s. The idea of easy and nearly unlimited access to goods was built-in to the new modes of shopping introduced in the mid to late 1800s, and has been part of our shopping ethos ever since. Continuous acquisition of objects not just necessary for sustaining life but for creating a social identity, for entertainment, and for day-to-day modern living has become part of our social and economic reality.

**Clutter**

Clutter is arguably the most recognizable hoarding behavior, made even more identifiable with recent television, magazine, and newspaper articles showing the hoarder’s environment. In the proposed criteria for hoarding disorder in the DSM-V, clutter is defined as “extensive accumulation of possessions in the home or workplace (such that the intended use of these spaces is no longer possible)” (Mataix-Cols et al 2010). Though the term clutter suggests disorder and disorganization of objects within a space, I will concentrate on clutter as the confluence of person, objects, and space. The person acquires objects and brings them into a personal sphere, and in arranging those objects (either consciously or unconsciously), influences the meaning and use of both the space and the objects. In this section, I will examine changing attitudes toward the personal space of the home in the mid 1800s through the 1940s, as this is the main period where cluttering occurs. I will then discuss the rise of the practice of collecting among middle-class Americans through roughly the same period.
The Home

Part of constructing personal and social identity is found in how people fill and order the spaces they occupy, particularly the home. In the mid to late 1800s, the middle class home in the United States “mirrored the nation’s transformation from an agricultural to an industrial society” (Cohen 1984:159). Home ownership was viewed as a symbol of American virtues such as hard work, economy, and self-discipline (Blaszczyk 2009:31). While ownership of this very tangible and solid structure might symbolize the possession of virtues associated with the financial sacrifices one must make to purchase a home, the inside of the home was often decorated to signal one’s adherence to Victorian morality. To the Victorians, moral development went hand-in-hand with the concept of the civilized nation and its refined populace. The form and content of the home showed social position, which was an indicator of moral character. (Halttunan 1989:159) Specifically, the parlor (the most public room of the home) showed a family’s social position and good taste through the conspicuous display of numerous objects (store bought, handmade, heirloom, or specimens of the natural world) thoughtfully arranged (Blaszczyk 2009; Cohen 1984; Dant 1999). Decorations might include:

“velvets, plushes, and lace, fringed upholstery, crocheted tidies, piano scarves and antimacassars, “fancy” chairs with gilt and ribbon, abundant oil portraits and watercolor landscapes, numerous small tables covered with heavy fringed velours, walls with flocked paper in dark tones and florid patterns, hand-painted screens and easels, wax flowers, souvenirs, and knickknacks of every variety (Halttunen 1989:163).
The parlor was filled with beautiful, fine, and unusual objects which visitors would find both lovely and interesting. The morality was in having the good taste to provide guests with an aesthetically enriching environment (Halttunen 1989:161).

In the early 1900s came a rejection of the overfilled parlor in favor of the simpler, airier living room of the American bungalow, a home style that was widely popular from the late 1800s through the 1950s. The interior of the bungalow was decorated more simply and tended to emphasize more uniquely American decorating trends such as the Arts and Crafts Movement and Colonial Revivalism (Blaszczyk 2009:43-49; Cohen 1984:160-161). The parlor was replaced by the living room, a room that was not shuttered and reserved only for company, but one which was to be used by the occupants of the home. Though simpler decorating reflected a general move away from the overcrowded Victorian parlor, it should not be mistaken for disinterest in interior design. Whereas the parlor had been used to show the upright character of the inhabitants, the living room showed their personality.

The expression of personality did not come cheap. Following World War II, the idealized middle class home was found in suburbia, and a significant portion of the family income was spent on household decoration, utility, and upkeep. According to historian Tyler May, in the late 1940s American spending on “household furnishings and appliances rose 240 percent. In those same five years, purchases for food rose only 33 percent, and for clothing a mere 20 percent” (1999:301). There was considerable emphasis on buying objects for the home. The affluent suburban home was a symbol of the “American way of life.” Objects such as the washing machine, the dishwasher, the
pool table, curtains, and the easy chair helped create this American identity for the occupants of the home.

At this point the reader may well ask: what do attitudes about the home have to do with clutter? In modern American society, we have been trained to view the home as an extension of ourselves; our class, our status, our intellect, and our personal taste are made manifest in our dwelling places. “In our homes we confront ourselves and our culture through the material form of things,” writes sociologist Tim Dant (1999:83). From the mid 1800s through the mid 1900s, we can see how social pressures shaped the arrangement of that most personal of spaces, the home. While home types and interior decorating trends changed over time, the ideal of membership to the American middle class remained relatively consistent throughout this 100 year period, as did the perception that this membership could be signaled via the arrangement of material goods within the home. Here we find the intersection of the attitude toward the home and clutter: that what we have within our homes speaks to who we are as individuals and members of society.

Finally, a discussion of the home cannot be complete without mention of the part it plays in our concepts of privacy and the use of space. Kron (1983) notes that privacy is not necessarily about being alone, but is “your right to determine what is communicated to others about you and to control access to your self, which is the essence of individuality and freedom” (p.27). Privacy plays an important part in our self-identity, as it allows us to be ourselves within our own spaces. In the Victorian home we can see how control over self-image was managed within the layout of the structure. The parlor
was the most public space in a private home, and it was here that the occupants of the home constructed their social identity to guests. This room was kept separate from the more private areas of the house, such as the kitchen and the bedrooms. (Halttunen 1989:159-160) The living room removed some of the rigid divisions of the Victorian home and made more of the home open to the scrutiny of visitors (Halttunen 1989:187-188). Some spaces were still more personal than others, as bedrooms, dens, bathrooms, and kitchens might be less accessible by varying degrees to guests. Conflict over the use of space in the modern home thus arises, one that can often be found in the hoarder’s household. With more lax divisions between the private and public spaces of the home, one occupant (the hoarder) often dominates the shared rooms of the home, denying other occupants the use of those rooms and causing tension and a breakdown in social relationships. (Wilbram et al 2008:68-69)

Collecting

The other aspect of clutter that I will explore here is collecting, a practice which helps reveal how objects are valued in modern American society. Hoarders are often accused of accumulating things that have little value and no function, but many people in our society acquire and keep objects that seem to have no real purpose outside of being aesthetically pleasing or sentimentally important. Such seemingly purposeless objects find meaning and worth in the eyes of the collector, for “a large part of what makes certain ordinary consumption objects extraordinary to collectors is that they have been
selected and saved by the collector, not because of any inherent use value, but precisely for their non-use value” (Belk 1995:62).

Collecting is not a new behavior in Western society. What is new is that while in the past collecting was limited to the moneyed upper classes, the mass-production of goods from the 1800s onward made collecting a more egalitarian pastime. The wealthy had long collected masterpieces of art, unusual specimens of the natural world, or archaeological artifacts: “authentic” items with cultural value (Belk 1995; Pearce 1998). Authentic artifacts are “those which, when collected, are deemed to be of value because they offer insights, however flawed, into the society which made and used them originally” (Pearce 1998:40). Artifacts of an authentic nature such as artwork or historical items tend to be rare, expensive, and difficult to find, making collecting an activity originally reserved for the moneyed elite.

During and after the Industrial Revolution, however, the diversity of items that could be collected increased, and there was something for any pocketbook. People of modest means might not be able to collect artwork like John D. Rockefeller or rare books like Thomas Jefferson, but almost anyone could collect stamps, postcards, tobacco tins, records, pencils, toys, or any number of other “non-authentic” objects (Belk 1995:53). Non-authentic artifacts are objects that do not necessarily offer insights into society, but which are collected for the sake of the activity of collecting (Pearce 1998:40-41). Many non-authentic items were produced for the sole purpose of being collected, belonging to a set or series, such as baseball cards. Other items were removed from their original
context of use and given a new decorative or aesthetic function as part of a collection, like salt and pepper shakers or beer steins.

Throughout the 1900s collecting became a popular form of structured personal activity away from, but in many ways mirroring, the workplace. “Fewer work hours, greater alienation from work activities, and increased affluence” all contributed to the legitimization of leisure activities such as collecting (Belk 1995:55). People had more time and money to spend on recreational pursuits, but idleness was discouraged. Collecting (along with a number of other activities such as making handicrafts, taking classes, joining sport clubs, or hiking) facilitated the maintenance of a strong work ethic and was viewed as a constructive use of time, making it a guilt-free way to spend one’s leisure time (Belk 1995:55; Gelber 1991:745).

Collecting and other hobbies became extremely popular during the years of the Great Depression, when they were seen as a job that one could not lose or work that would never be scarce (Gelber 1991:743). In fact, collecting was often viewed as a reflection of the market processes of consumption and production (Belk 1995:55-56; Pearce 1998:51-52). Gelber’s study of stamp collecting, for example, found that the collectors viewed the activity as leisure that emulated work (1992). Philatelists (stamp collectors) might sell or trade stamps for profit or to build their collections, they might collect stamps as a long-term investment, or they might buy stamps at low prices and sell them when demand increased, much like stock market speculators (Gelber 1992: 759). Incorporating practices associated with a capitalist economy into a leisure activity not only gave collecting a certain legitimacy, it “reduced the contrast between work and play
and thus made work, as well as play, less alien” (Gelber 1992:743). Collecting was a pleasurable form of work away from the factory floor or the office building. For younger collectors, it taught a set of skills, a way of thinking necessary for learning how to act in the working world.

During the 1930s, books and articles such as *The Care and Feeding of Hobby Horses* (1934), *The Challenge of Leisure* (1934), “Time Out! The Psychology of a Hobby” (1938); and *Fun With A Hobby* (1938) sought to define and categorize hobbies, signaling their widespread popularity in the United States (Gelber 1991:744). Hobbies like collecting were not only viewed as a way to combat idleness, but also loneliness, depression, nervous disorders, and a host of other medical/psychological problems (Gelber 1991:746). Hobbies became important among older Americans as the concept of retirement emerged as a legitimate stage of later life. Retirees, upon leaving the working world, could keep mind and body active through the adoption of a hobby. Here, then, is a link between consumerism, maintaining objects in the home, and health: not only was collecting good for the economy, it was good for the body and mind.

Perhaps most interestingly, whereas collecting and other hobbies were viewed as purely upper class pursuits prior to the technological breakthroughs in mass production, transportation, and communication in the 1800s, by the 1930s hobbies were promoted as democratic. Anyone could be a collector (and a collector could be anyone), from a banker to a street sweeper: “collecting…was supposed to erase social distinctions and create a community of common interest” (Gelber 1991:747). Collecting crossed gender
and age lines, too, as men, women, and children could all participate in this structured, social activity.

From the late 1800s through the 1930s collecting became a popular activity among working and middle class Americans. It was not just socially acceptable, it was actively encouraged in the general population as a legitimate and wholesome way to spend one’s leisure time. Collecting was and still is viewed as a form of self-expression that, though it consists of objects, is neither static nor finite. In a survey of collectors in the U.K., Pearce found that 96% of respondents did not believe their collections would ever be complete (1998:158). A collection is never truly finished, there is always something more that can be added, whether it is a rare find or a newly available limited edition item.

The link between the hoarder’s clutter and collecting is both explicit and implicit. There is certainly a link between the drive to collect objects *ad infinitum* and hoarding behavior. Part of the clutter of the hoarder’s home may be made up of collections, as with this collector of rock’n’roll mementos and media:

At home, Jackson hid an obsession with the rock band Blondie. His memorabilia collection had begun to overflow from his two spare rooms into the entire house. Jackson had spent years buying Blondie items at auctions and online, including T-shirts, ticket stubs, albums and CDs, DVDs, posters, pins, and signed prints…Like many other hoarder collectors, Jackson rationalized that there was real value in this memorabilia aside from its emotional value. But it is rarely the real value of the stuff that makes collectors flip into hoarders. (Paxton 2011:25-26)
Collecting is an activity that has been socially constructed as an overall good and healthy way to spend one’s time. Both the collector and the hoarder feel a kind of stewardship over their objects, an obligation to keep and curate the objects in their care. Collecting offers a person both the goal of the complete collection or perfect specimen as well as a system by which that goal can be achieved.

What, then, separates the collector from the hoarder? It appears that the magnitude and organization are the primary factors in the determination of hoarding, not the act of collecting itself or the subject of the collection. In other words, the motivation and rationalization behind collecting and clutter appear to be quite similar, it is only the manifestation of that motivation and rationalization within the living/working space that makes the difference between the two. Combined with the socially constructed attitude toward the home in modern America as the space in which the relationship of the occupant with social culture is expressed through material culture, and there is little mystery where the tendency toward the hoarding behavior of clutter originates.

**Difficulty Discarding**

The failure to throw away or clean out is what makes the other behaviors associated with hoarding so socially problematic: if a person can adequately thin out their belongings on a regular basis, acquisition and clutter become much more manageable and much less noticeable. The inability to discard objects is what causes the most mental anguish for the hoarder, whose attachment to seemingly useless items may confuse or anger friends and loved ones. Difficulty discarding, or retention, might seem like the
absence of action, but I will examine it here as both action and inaction. On one hand it is the avoidance of the action of discarding, on the other it is the act of saving, storing, and curating one’s belongings. I will examine the how the green movement popularized in the 1980s and 1990s changed attitudes about storing, saving, recycling, and reusing objects. I will also re-examine of the human-object link.

Waste, Disposal and Reuse

The failure to discard objects creates a blockage in the normal, expected cycle of use of many things. Wrappers and packaging are meant to be opened and disposed of once the object of importance has been removed. Food expires. Clothing goes out of style or becomes worn and tattered. Appliances break beyond the value of repair. There are countless examples of the built-in obsolescence of everyday objects. In our economic system, objects have a limited life cycle, or so conventional wisdom suggests. How, then, is the retention of objects socially encouraged? Let us first examine what kinds of objects we do not keep, the things that are categorized as waste or trash. As Fisher and Shipton note, “[p]ondering on things we consider of no value helps us to understand what we do value, and why” (2010:3). What constitutes waste and trash is as much socially determined as what constitutes fashionable consumables, as is what people do with waste items.

In modern western society, objects that are not useful, fashionable, or valuable are likely to be classified as trash and thrown away. Many cultures around the world and throughout history do the same, but the scale on which unwanted items are discarded in
modern western societies is historically and geographically unprecedented (Strasser 1999:4). Built-in or planned obsolescence, introduced into American culture in the 1930s, tells consumers that goods have a life cycle consisting of manufacture (birth), use (life), and loss of function/style (death). Once goods have gone through this life cycle, they can be replaced by new ones that are technologically or stylistically superior and the cycle restarts (Harmer 2005). Additionally, purchased objects often come in packaging that is designed to be thrown away once opened or unwrapped, encouraging hygiene and cleanliness at the expense of waste (Fisher and Shipton 2010; Strasser 1999). Academic literature on household waste often states that modern western culture constitutes a throwaway society in which the cycle of purchasing, using, discarding, and purchasing anew governs the massive and problematic production of waste (Gregson et al 2007a).

The image of the throwaway society may be popular in the public and academic mindset, but a growing body of scholarly literature suggests that the practice of waste production and disposal is more complicated (Fisher and Shipton 2010; Gregson et al 2007a; Gregson et al 2007b; Hetherington 2004; Lucas 2002). Social motivation is involved in the creation and treatment of household waste and the process of discarding or reusing objects. More than that, disposal should be seen as a key part of the consumption process, one that goes beyond the process of ceasing to use and throwing away an object as the final act in our relationship to that object (Hetherington 2004:158). Gregson et al (2007a) note that it is a mistake “to represent human relations with the object world in a way which elevates the practices of discarding and abandoning things over those of keeping and preserving them” (p.685). We may be throwing away more
things but we are keeping more things at the same time. One look at expanding house sizes and the explosion of the self-storage industry from the 1980s through the 2000s illustrates our increasing need for storage space (Self-Storage Association 2010). Lucas (2002) describes this as the dilemma between the competing moral systems of thrift and hygiene. Disposability carries the virtue of hygiene but retaining objects carries the virtue of thrift and economy (Lucas 2002:6).

The act of disposal may not mean that an object has to become waste. Comparison of the composition of household trash from the late 19th and late 20th centuries shows that while some categories of waste, particularly food remains and paper packaging, have dramatically increased, others categories have remained consistently small, such as furniture and textiles (Lucas 2002:14). Some objects such as books or clothing are thus more likely to be reused, stored, or passed on as second-hand goods to others. Not all disposal practices are the same, suggesting that not all objects are viewed in the same way. It is appropriate to throw away some objects, transforming them into waste, while others are disposed of in such a way that they bypass that transformation.

One way objects avoid becoming waste is through reuse, which carries with it another modern virtue: environmentalism. Over the past few decades, people in the United States have been encouraged to “reduce, reuse, and recycle” in order the limit the amount of waste they produce. Reuse of cardboard boxes, plastic food containers, wrapping paper, and other items is very common and may even be practiced more often than recycling, as “[t]he common barrier to recycling—an individual’s feelings that their efforts are insignificant as a ‘power of one’—does not seem to inhibit re-use” (Fisher and
Environmentalism and function merge with reuse, making it perhaps a more personal way to be “green.”

Sometimes objects that would otherwise be classified as waste and thrown away make it into places in the home that Fisher and Shipton (2010) call “twilight zones” (104). Twilight zones are out-of-sight between places like sheds, attics, cellar racks, top shelves, or junk drawers which can accumulate items without invading on the aesthetic or function of the rest of the house. Objects that have no clear reuse purpose can often make their way into twilight zones, where they wait until a need for them arises, which it may or may not (Fisher and Shipton 2010:108-109). Saved packaging may have a potential for further use, but that use may never occur. The person storing the items may also not have a completely clear idea what they are keeping something for, they may just be keeping it because they view it as potentially useful. “Reasons for consigning packaging to a twilight zone seem to range from a conscious desire to be thrifty and to minimize waste to the inertia that can overtake possessions that for no clear reasons are not got rid of but are stored” (Fisher and Shipton 2010:108). Physical twilight zones may also help us create mental ones. Hetherington (2004) notes that sometimes disposal that is left unfinished (or perhaps moved to the kitchen junk drawer) is a matter of creative accounting (p.163). By moving an object into a new place, we are mentally moving it along in the disposal practice, and therefore dealing with the chore of getting rid of waste without actually getting rid of it.

An examination of the ways in which people view waste and practice disposal is important to understanding behavior associated with the retention of objects. The above
research shows that throwing a thing away is not a simple process, and that there are viable alternatives that individuals use to keep objects from becoming waste. Reusing, recycling, and saving are all viewed in a positive light in the present day, as these actions represent the virtues of eco-consciousness, thrift, efficiency, and economy. Certainly the reasoning explored here that keeps objects from leaving the home can be seen in hoarders, who may view their collections as monuments of their own environmentalism or frugality. They may view many things as occupying a twilight zone, waiting for the right moment for reuse. As Fisher and Shipton (2010) point out, “[t]he objects in such a twilight zone, instead of resting between two states, may have more in common with a hoard,” (p. 112).

The Human-Object Link Revisited

Objects are very much a part of our personal and social lives. Special events are commemorated and social relationships are affirmed through the giving of objects on birthdays, holidays, and other important occasions (Pearce 1998:106). In passing heirlooms from generation to generation, we identify ourselves with our ancestors in the past as well as our successors in the future (Pearce 1998:106-107). Souvenirs and gifts help us remember a time, a place, or a person. In much the same way that pilgrims viewed reliquaries containing a lock of a saint’s hair, we view objects that have touched another time, place, or person as somehow imbued with the essence of that experience. The objects we own signal our identities to others and become physical manifestations of memory and sentiment.
Today we are inundated with more material culture than ever before. In a 1999 paper titled “The Tyranny of Choice,” Waldman notes that “a typical supermarket in 1976 had 9,000 products; today it has more than 30,000. The average produce section in 1975 carried sixty-five items; this summer it carried 285” (p. 360). Having so many choices gives the shopper almost endless opportunities to express his or her identity through purchased objects. A particular item relates to “either the purchaser or the intended user, and the two are inseparable; that is, the specific nature of that person is confirmed in the particularity of the selection” (Miller 1987:190). Waldman (1999) notes that while a wider variety of goods provides consumers with more choices, having more choices can stymie the average shopper.

With such a huge array of possible products from which to choose, the consumer can feel that somewhere within that array is the product that fits one’s need exactly. In a study on consumer satisfaction, Schwartz found that people who spent the most time and effort on finding the perfect product were often the least happy with their decisions (2004:44). Shoppers who tried hardest to make the best possible choices were more likely to feel disappointment with their purchases and to feel that every possible option had not been explored (Schwartz 2004:45). Trying to find that perfect product among dozens, perhaps hundreds, is time-consuming and mentally fatiguing. Failure to find perfection can lead to dissatisfaction not just with the product, but with one’s ability to make wise consumer decisions. Keeping the objects that one purchases, then, is a way of bypassing that exhausting decision-making process at the back end: by keeping
everything, the previous decisions never have to be revisited and one’s choices are not called into question.

Given the degree to which we embed objects in our personal and social identities, and given the sheer volume of material culture with which we are confronted, it is little wonder that anyone, much less the hoarder, can feel distress at the process of discarding things. When we discard objects, we are not just throwing away a static material item, we are making choices about who we are and who we want to be. The objects we choose to keep represent not just what we use on a functional level, but the state of our social relationships, our future hopes, connections to our past, the way we view ourselves, and so much more.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper I have examined how an interplay of social forces has created an atmosphere in which hoarding behaviors have arisen. The acquisition of goods through shopping was transformed in the mid to late 1800s in the United States by innovative entrepreneurs like John Wanamaker and Frank W. Woolworth, who built luxurious palaces of consumption and spacious five-and-ten stores. In turn, their business practices transformed consumers through the shopping experience, making them eager for new products and expectant of access and affordability. Buying became a social practice in which anyone could participate as well as an economic necessity. As such, the acquiring of goods was and still is promoted as an expected, normal, and even healthy activity.

Creating a sense of the home and a sense of self through the accumulation and display of objects has also been discussed. Looking at the move from the Victorian parlor to the bungalow living room from the later 1800s through the 1940s showed that aesthetics may change, but an underlying sense that social class and values can be shown by one’s possessions does not. Whatever the type of home, the mass production and new consumption habits fostered from the mid-1800s allowed the inhabitants access to a wide variety of goods that could be used to represent their character and middle or upper class standards. Hobbies such as collecting objects became intensely popular among all social classes in the United States in the early 1900s. During the Great Depression collecting and other hobbies were viewed as a kind of structured activity that incorporated a strong...
work ethic in leisure time, retirement, or periods of unemployment. Social ties could be made and maintained through collecting, and it was viewed as a physically and mentally healthy pastime. Again, access to a large variety of manufactured goods at fairly affordable prices made collecting items such as stamps, baseball cards, photographs, records, and books feasible for people from many different walks of life. Here we can see how not just acquiring but keeping objects, a key component to creating the household clutter associated with hoarding, has been encouraged as a socially acceptable practice.

Finally, hoarding is characterized by the inability of the hoarder to part with their objects, or difficulty discarding. In this thesis I have shown how the life cycle of an object does not necessarily end in disposal: it may be reused, recycled, given away, or saved with the possibility of future use in a new context. Hoarders and non-hoarders alike may feel that their decision to save items rather than throw them away shows their thrift, economy, or environmental awareness. Another important aspect of the retention of objects explored here is the role objects play in memory and personal sentiment. Gifts or heirlooms can represent social relationships, thus making them difficult to discard. Souvenirs remind us of other times, places, or people and are embedded with memories we want to keep alive. Throwing away the object can be, in our minds, tantamount to throwing away the memory. One common characteristic among hoarders is a belief that they have an insufficient memory, but in truth, objects are used to represent memories by nearly everyone in our society (Frost and Hartl 1996). Finally, in revisiting the human-object link it we can see how the acquisition of goods and keeping them affects the way
in which we discard them. Having such a wide range of objects available to choose from can cause feelings of indecisiveness and inadequacy in our ability to make the perfect consumer choices. Keeping objects rather than discarding them is a way of avoiding that feeling of indecisiveness after we have purchased them. Like deficiency in memory, another common trait among hoarders is indecisiveness (Frost and Hartl 1996).

Regardless of any individual psychopathology that may trigger the desire to accumulate and keep a large number of objects, people in the United States live in a social world in which the behaviors associated with hoarding have been historically developed and are actively encouraged in day-to-day living. It is not surprising that a mental disorder relating to the accumulation and keeping of objects has arisen. Though the individual may be treated for hoarding, he or she will still exist in a social world where the pressures to acquire and retain objects are constantly operating. The push to buy new goods is ingrained in our economic system. Identity, home, and memory are concepts that are tied to the objects we keep, arrange, and display. Our ideas about thrift, efficiency, and resourcefulness shape the way we treat objects once we have used them. What we view to be appropriate for recycling, reusing, saving, or throwing away is culturally influenced, and may be as much a social act as shopping or collecting.

**Directions for Further Study**

Using secondary sources means interpreting historical sources that have already been interpreted through at least one other author, thus bringing up issues of potential inaccuracy or bias. An alternative strategy for this project would have been to use
primary data on which each of the secondary sources is based, but this was not feasible for the wide time and geographical range addressed here. More focused studies using primary, archival, or statistical sources may be possible, using the research here as a framework to be enhanced or modified.

The approach used in this thesis concentrates on the western industrialized world, as hoarding behavior is most apparent in such societies. Mataix-Cols et al (2010) point out that most research on hoarding has been done in industrialized countries, and this research continues in that vein. Although this thesis does not examine whether or how hoarding behavior is part of the social relationship between people and objects in developing countries, it is my hope that the research here might be used to provide a template for such a study.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


