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# Conceptualizing Hoarding Behavior Among Elderly Women: A Mixed-Methods Approach

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CONCEPTUALIZING HOARDING BEHAVIOR AMONG ELDERLY WOMEN:  
A MIXED-METHODS APPROACH

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## Abstract

### CONCEPTUALIZING HOARDING BEHAVIOR AMONG ELDERLY WOMEN: A MIXED-METHODS APPROACH

By Susan J. Murdock, M.S.W.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

Dissertation Committee Chairperson: Joseph Walsh, Ph.D.  
School of Social Work

Hoarding in the community involves substantial cluttering and impaired functioning, often exposing the hoarder to extensive health and safety risks. This research, based on Functionalism social theory, explores the three elements of hoarding—relentless acquisition, intense possessiveness of objects, and a reluctance to discard possessions—as a sociocultural phenomenon. The mixed methods methodology entailed a quantitative study involving a survey completed by 134 adult protective services workers throughout Virginia and a qualitative study of five randomly-selected adult protective services workers who volunteered for in-depth interviews.

Findings revealed that adult protective services workers come in contact with very severe cases of hoarding, with over two-thirds of the cases cited having extremely

hazardous, unsafe, and cluttered living conditions. Similar to other research studies, hoarding was most prevalent among elderly women and the most common objects hoarded included printed materials such as newspapers, magazines, and junk mail. Factor analyses resulted in three factors with high loadings and correlations, particularly the factor that associates hoarding with a relentless need or desire to acquire more possessions. Content analyses of the qualitative data found that workers recognized several ways in which hoarding was functional, including emotional attachment to possessions, reducing stress, and providing meaning and identity. The mixed methods approach demonstrated that adult protective services workers tend to ascribe mental illness explanations to many hoarding cases, often equating hoarding to an addiction, although other published research finds only a nebulous connection between mental illness and hoarding behavior.

This research corroborates other studies that find that belief systems underlie hoarding behaviors, particularly how hoarders' possessions provide comfort and security; possessions are considered functional, valuable, and irreplaceable; and that the owner is responsible for maintaining control over possessions. The findings of this study have implications for social work practice and treatment models.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

### Introduction

Hoarding is a universal issue that is insufficiently understood and poorly represented in empirical research, with most of the literature focusing on a psychiatric or psychological perspective. This dissertation represents an attempt to understand hoarding among elderly women within a broader framework, particularly the way in which hoarding is functional. The study is from the perspective of adult protective services (APS) workers because they, more than any other profession, have the unique experience of observing hoarding within the home. The general viewpoint of this dissertation is that hoarding is not an aberration so much as an overzealous attachment to possessions.

### Definition of Hoarding

The definition of hoarding as “the acquisition of, and failure to discard, large numbers of possessions that have little use or value” (Frost, Steketee & Green, 2003, p. 323) is typically utilized in journal literature. The definition focuses on a cognitive-behavioral explanation to hoarding--relentless acquiring and reluctance to dispose--while other definitions focus on the resulting impairment in terms of functionality of the house or focus on the large quantity and uselessness of objects. For example, the definition utilized by Steketee, Frost, and Kim (2001) illustrates how hoarding impairs the hoarder’s ability to use and navigate through the home:

Compulsive hoarding is defined as significant clutter in the home, inability to use parts of the living space for intended purposes, and impairment in functioning as a result of the hoarding problem (Steketee et al., 2001, p. 177).

Another definition that presents the problem of functioning as well as pointing out the problems addressing hoarding is the following:

Hoarding behavior is defined here as the excessive collection and retention of any materials to the point that it impedes day-to-day functioning and creates a hazard or potential hazard for the individual... in older adults (it) represents a complex set of psychological, physical and sociological factors that requires multilevel responses (Thomas, 1997, p. 45).

The large quantity and uselessness of objects is repeated in the definition of hoarding in other literature, including “The ‘hoarding habit’ is the practice of collecting a large number of mostly useless objects” (Stein, 1993, p. 1045).

Hoarding is typically a hidden problem as hoarders rarely or never have social contact in their homes or discuss their hoarding problem with either confidants or mental health professionals. Symptoms of compulsive hoarding include (a) saving broken or useless items; (b) buying excessive quantities of goods; (c) keeping large quantities of things for future use and never using them; (d) retrieving trash from garbage cans; (e) having difficulty discarding unusable items; (f) saving stacks of newspapers, junk mail, or other printed material; (g) making long, extensive lists and records and keeping the lists long after they are needed; and (h) saving items for possible use by others (Penzel, n.d.). Hoarders very rarely recognize that their hoarding is problematic and seldom seek



or accept help. “People who hoard express strong beliefs about the necessity of saving possessions, even threatening violence against friends or family who attempt to dispose of their things” (Frost, Steketee & Williams, 2000, p. 230).

Animal hoarding is similar to possession hoarding in that the drive to collect is relentless and the ability to detach is practically inexistent. The dire consequences of hoarding animals by persons who cannot maintain a healthy environment for the animals leads to a definition of animal hoarding that is based on risk factors to the animals, as Patronek’s following definition:

There is no standard definition of a hoarding case, no single investigative or reporting format. For the study, I used the following definition of a hoarder: someone who accumulates a large number of animals; fails to provide minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, and veterinary care; and fails to act on the deteriorating condition of the animals (including disease, starvation, and even death) or the environment (severe overcrowding, extremely unsanitary conditions) or the negative effect of the collection on their own health and well-being and on that of other household members (Patronek, 1999, p. 81-82).

Hoarders typically hoard either specific items (such as craft materials, bags, or newspapers) or they accumulate and save a multitude of junk. One type of hoarding is syllogomania, the relentless amassing and saving of trash.

#### Hoarding as a Social Issue

Hoarding is a socio-psychological issue that crosses federal, state, and local agencies, and their regulations, policies and procedures. Hoarding behaviors have been

addressed by law enforcement, mental health agencies, building inspectors, health departments, animal control, and adult protective services. Each of these disciplines offers a different perspective and different strategies for reducing hoarded collections and dealing with a compulsive hoarder. The focus of this dissertation is on the perspective by adult protective services as it has the greatest relevance to the field of social work.

Hoarding is conceptualized as a social problem by examining prevalence, adult protective services laws, task forces on hoarding, response from the courts, and issues.

### *Prevalence*

Because there is no national database that collects records of hoarding or even self-neglect cases, the prevalence of hoarding among elderly women is unknown. The lack of statistics underscores the controversy in the field of adult protective services in which the collection and retention of cases are viewed as irrelevant to the mission of providing services to victims of adult abuse and neglect. In a review of adult protective services statutes across the country, only 15 states manage a centralized database that archives adult protective services cases (Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Hawaii, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Vermont, Washington, and Wyoming.)

About 2% of the elderly population has problems with hoarding, nearly one million people nationwide and over 21,000 in Virginia. This estimate is based on findings by the 1991 study by National Association of Adult Protective Services Administrators (NAAPSA) of self-neglecters, who typically have hoarding problems, and the 2000 study by Frost, Steketee, and Williams. The NAAPSA study estimated that 2%

of the elderly population have self-neglecting behaviors serious enough to warrant an adult protective services founded report and the Frost, Steketee, and Williams study estimated a prevalence rate of 26 cases of hoarding per 1,000 population, or 2.6% per capita rate.

“The prevalence of older adults engaging in hoarding behaviors in their homes or places of residence appears to be increasing nationally” (Franks, Lund, Poulton, & Caserta, 2004, p. 78), primarily due to a rapidly-increasing elder population, greater numbers of elders living alone in the community, stricter laws requiring the reporting of suspected self-neglect, increased longevity of individuals, and more stringent community sanitary regulations. These factors, coupled with increased public awareness of hoarding behavior and consequences, help bring the issue of hoarding out of hiding and into the forefront.

#### *Adult Protective Services Laws*

The most common type of abuse to elders, people who are at least 60 years old, is self-neglect (Rathbone-McCuan, 1996). Self-neglect, the neglect of one’s personal environment, health, nutrition, or medical needs, includes hoarding behavior because the behavior results in risks to the health and safety of the elder. Because the adult protective services (APS) field promotes the right to self-determination, many states require that an impairment must be present before adult protective services will intervene.

In Virginia, intervention strategies by adult protective services workers are based on severity of hoarding, the extent of any physical, cognitive, or emotional impairment present in the hoarder, the hoarder’s willingness to participate in modifying her home, the

apparent and potential health and safety risks, response by the community and the hoarder's family, and the presence of animals. In many cases, APS workers are able to engage the hoarder in a collaborative effort to reduce the clutter. In more severe cases, legal intervention is required to protect the safety of animals and, if incapacity can be demonstrated, the safety of the hoarder. APS workers are often in the position of having to determine whether the hoarding is a lifestyle choice, a "cry for help," or the result of a physical, emotional, or cognitive disorder. Workers often place hoarders with disabilities with family members or in assisted living facilities or nursing homes, which may involve an involuntary placement.

The extent to which there is a legislative mandate to address hoarding and self-neglecting behaviors through an adult protective services intervention varies widely throughout the country. A review of adult protective services legislation across the country revealed that only nine states recognize self-neglect as an adult protective services type of elder abuse, though many states include within their neglect definition an acknowledgement that one could neglect oneself and be considered a vulnerable adult eligible for adult protective services. Definitions of self-neglect typically specify a risk of endangerment, thereby allowing hoarding to be considered self-neglect because of the risk of health and safety issues. California and Utah include the caveat "Choice of lifestyle or living arrangements may not, by themselves, be evidence of self-neglect" (California statute §§15630-15632 and Utah statute §62A-3-301).

*Task Forces on Hoarding*

Throughout the country, task forces are being organized to address the community issue of hoarding. In Madison, Wisconsin, the Dane County Hoarding Task Force has been active in identifying local ordinances regarding building conditions, developing a resource book, educating family, police, and service providers, and conducting research and evaluation of hoarders' experiences. The task force, comprised of a variety of social workers, psychologists, the building inspector, board of supervisors, nurses, sanitarians, deputy sheriff, and case managers, created an assessment tool, decision tree, and protocol for making multi-disciplinary interventions into hoarding cases. The decision tree and protocols define what agencies to contact and when, based primarily on the extent to which the hoarder is cooperative, the mental health of the hoarder, and the safety/health hazards present (Dane County Hoarding Task Force, 1999/2000).

In Virginia, the counties of Arlington, Fairfax, and York and the city of Alexandria have created task forces to manage hoarding cases and provide collaboration and communication between agencies. Agencies involved in the task forces include fire and rescue departments, adult and child protective services, animal control, health departments, housing and community development, mental health, law enforcement, and the department of public works and environmental services. In some cases, the task force offers resources to adult protective services staff, such as establishing consults with psychiatrists for difficult cases or developing protocols in establishing guardianship.

*Response from the Courts*

In the Frost, Hartl, Christian, and Williams study (1995), law enforcement was involved in half of the hoarding cases studied, with some or all of the hoarded possessions being removed by the city and the hoarder placed under supervision. About half of the hoarders were either evicted by landlords or, if they owned their house, were removed and the building was condemned. The study also found that hoarded objects created fires in about one-tenth of the homes, resulting in three fatalities.

Animal hoarding presents a more serious risk and a more aggressive law enforcement response. In Patronek's 1999 study of animal hoarding, most of the animals had to be euthanised due to terminal illnesses and over one-fourth of the hoarders were placed in guardianship, institutional care, or supervised living. Other interventions included prohibition from owning animals, court-ordered monitoring, psychiatric evaluation, and short jail time.

*Issues*

Hoarding creates dilemmas for practitioners in providing services, as exemplified by the following:

These elders maintain elements of personal dignity, a fierce insistence on their independence, and do not necessarily welcome outside intervention. When assistance is mandated (if the person is a danger to themselves or others) or volunteered, some elders may try to escape from those offering help, directly refuse the assistance, or sabotage efforts to improve their conditions (Rathbone-McCuan, 1996, p. 367).

Practitioners and clients may disagree on ways to reduce risks due to value differences, acceptance of inadequate or unsafe living conditions, and the degree of autonomy appropriate for the situation. Some elders are resistant to help and consume enormous community resources through social welfare agencies, hospitals, and law enforcement that become frustrated by their inability to intervene legally. In addition, the practitioner also faces limited services, complex bureaucracy, long waiting lists, and insufficient or unavailable informal support for the elder. Rathbone-McCuan (1996) also notes that appropriate role models for aging are absent, social benefits are inadequate, and elders' medical and psychiatric needs are often unmet. The balance between wanting to help and acknowledging rights to privacy makes intervention difficult and eventually threatens the elder's health.

APS [adult protective services] practitioners face the difficulty of working within a highly complex framework of laws criticized for (a) lack of funding to assist in investigations, intervention, and services; (b) disproportionately low funding, which appears to be decreasing over the years instead of increasing with the aging population; (c) inconsistency regarding who is protected (vulnerable or well elders); (d) who is required to report, and what the penalties are for non-reporting individuals; and (e) an inconsistency of language within the laws from state to state (Bergeron, 2000, p. 40).

During 1986-2000, a time when child abuse was decreasing, there was a 300% increase in APS reports, primarily self-neglect cases. Of the Social Services Block Grant, 93% goes to child abuse, 6% to domestic violence and less than 1% for elder abuse (U.S.

Congress Special Committee on Aging, 2001). As a result of funding and inconsistent laws, hoarding as an adult protective services case and a self-neglecting behavior will be handled inconsistently throughout the country.

Although APS programs now exist in every state, practices may vary greatly according to the specific law and policy of the particular jurisdiction responsible for the program. This phenomenon perhaps can be attributed to the fact that APS has developed relatively free from such constraining or unifying influences as might have been provided by federal regulation (Mixson, 1996, p. 14).

Other issues that plague adult protective services programs and have ramifications for addressing hoarding cases are (a) a lack of common definitions and terminology, (b) inadequate public and political support, (c) lack of community awareness, (d) limited assessment and treatment tools, (e) lack of consistency in criteria for investigating reports and making decisions, (f) inadequate collaboration with law enforcement, (g) poor training of adult protective services staff, (h) lack of knowledge and information about hoarding and self-neglect, and (i) insufficient services, resources, and treatment options (Tatara, 1990).

Communities have numerous issues with hoarding cases because there is no single agency responsible for hoarding cases and multiple agencies are involved in service provision. Many agencies become frustrated when mental incompetence could not be established and they cannot make an involuntary intervention. Forced cleanouts can be very costly, often running into thousands of dollars for the community, and are often unsuccessful. Some hoarders experience extremely catastrophic emotional



responses when separated from their possessions or home. When returned to her home, the hoarder typically starts another collection, particularly if she hoards animals. Hoarding cases requires long-term and intensive case management, which is very difficult for many communities to fund and staff.

### Hoarding as a Psychological Issue

When elderly women who live alone start hoarding, it becomes a serious and potentially fatal problem. The hoarding either purposively or consequentially keeps social contact in the home on a very limited basis, further endangering the elderly woman, who is already at high risk of social isolation. The hoarded items create a serious impediment in the elderly woman's ability to navigate throughout the house and utilize household furnishings to take care of herself. Hoarders have been known to sleep in cars in their garage because their beds are filled with hoarded items, or to be unable to cook meals because their stoves, refrigerators, and countertops are piled high with useless objects. As a result, elderly women who hoard, who are already experiencing sensory loss due to aging, are often neglectful of their nutritional and sanitation needs, thereby further jeopardizing their ongoing health. Additionally, the hoarded objects present a critical safety risk and some hoarders have actually been killed as a result of clutter collapsing or catching on fire.

While elderly women who hoard are fiercely resistant to intervention and show little willingness to receive treatment, certain treatment and intervention models have demonstrated some success. The pioneering work by Randy Frost, Gail Steketee, and

their colleagues in particular has revolutionized assessment, treatment, and intervention strategies.

#### *Assessment*

The most commonly utilized instruments in assessing hoarding behaviors are the Clutter Screening Questionnaire, the Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale, the Model of Capacity/Risk Hoarding Assessment, and the Saving Inventory--Revised. One or more of these instruments was utilized in most of the empirical research explored in the literature review of this dissertation.

The Clutter Screening Questionnaire assesses the extent to which the hoarded objects interfere with utilizing rooms and the amount of distress experienced when trying to dispose of objects. The Top Ten Clutter List addresses behaviors, including (a) having to move objects to access furniture, (b) falling over piles of possessions, (c) losing things, (d) refusing visitors, (e) other people being reluctant to enter the home, (f) inability to get to windows, doors, and fire escapes, and (g) bringing home more clutter (Dane County Hoarding Task Force, 1999/2000).

The Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale has separate scales for obsessions and compulsions. In each instrument, time spent, interference, distress, resistance, and control over obsessions/compulsions are scaled on continuums.

The Model of Capacity/Risk Hoarding Assessment utilizes an environmental assessment in addition to the Hoarding Severity Scale and Hoarding Cognitions Inventory. The assessment model requires interviewing the hoarder and his family and friends to gauge the hoarder's decision-making problems, avoidance behaviors, and the

level of anxiety during attempts to organize and discard possessions. The assessor also asks about the types of possessions, the reasons for saving, where the objects are stored, how the objects are acquired, and the extent to which relationships are damaged (Frost & Hartl, 1996).

The instrument utilized most frequently in empirical research is the Saving Inventory—Revised. The instrument demonstrated good internal consistency and test-retest reliability, with clear indices that differentiate hoarding from non-hoarding groups, and strong correlations with other hoarding measures. Factor analysis identified three discernible factors—difficulty discarding, extensive clutter, and excessive acquisition (Frost, Steketee, & Grisham, 2004).

### *Treatment*

Hoarders very rarely seek treatment and are very resistant to psychotherapy. When confronted, hoarders tend to minimize or deny the problem, give excuses or make promises to clean up. The models of treatment that have been successful in reducing hoarding behavior are derived from treatment modalities developed by Frost and Hartl (1996), Saxena and Maidment (2004), and Gail Steketee (2003).

The cognitive-behavioral treatment model designed by Frost and Hartl (1996) emphasizes that the first and primary goal of this treatment program is the creation of uncluttered living space. Treatment goals include (a) increase the appropriate use of space, (b) improve decision-making skills, (c) develop an organizational plan, (d) discard unneeded possessions, (e) reduce the accumulation of new possessions, and (f) develop the skill of self-instruction and cognitive correction. The therapist may not touch or

throw away anything without explicit permission, and the patient makes all decisions regarding saving, discarding, and organizing. The therapist assists in a systematic evaluation of the hoarded possessions and helps the hoarder categorize possessions into store/discard/recycle piles.

While the cognitive-behavioral treatment model designed by Frost and Hartl has demonstrated successful outcomes and decreased hoarding behaviors, the treatment modality is very time-intensive and therefore expensive. The model of Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP), designed by Saxena and Maidment (2004) has been presented as an alternative. In this modality, hoarders learn that nothing bad happens when they dispose of useless possessions and they learn how to organize remaining possessions more effectively. The model requires that the hoarder pick up the first item without sifting through a pile and make a discard/keep (with a storage plan)/recycle decision. The hoarder and therapist work together to reframe fears and discuss the consequences of disposing. The treatment model has demonstrated clear successes, but the hoarder must be highly motivated to change.

According to the 2003 study by Steketee, Frost, and Kyrios, to properly address the cognitive distortions associated with hoarding, it is essential to first define the emotions involved in the patient's attachment to possessions. Hoarders with fear-based attachments see their possessions as symbols of safety; without their possessions, they may feel vulnerable. In hoarders with grief-based attachments, thoughts of getting rid of possessions promote strong feelings of grief, as though losing possessions is like losing a friend. Hoarders with guilt-based attachments may feel that they are responsible for

ensuring that items are not wasted. Those with sentimentally-based attachments may feel that if they discard too many things, there will be little left of themselves. These types of hoarders may feel their belongings are extensions of themselves.

"We hope that by using this cognitive-behavior model, clinicians can break through the recognition problem many hoarders have," said Dr. Steketee, who works first to get hoarders to recognize that their cluttered living spaces are no longer functional. She then helps them restore the lost function through cognitive-behavioral therapy (Steketee et al., August 2003).

Although they have very limited locations, support groups such as Clutterers Anonymous and Clutterless Recovery Groups, Inc. have been established by persons sharing similar problems with acquiring, saving, and discarding possessions. Like other 12-step programs, Clutterers Anonymous uses a peer support model with buddies, mentors, and sponsors and incorporates spiritual, emotional, and behavioral tenets. They encourage daily action, no matter how small, providing and using storage place for possessions, and "for accessibility, beauty, and peace of mind, we keep some empty space" (Clutterers Anonymous, 2005).

### *Intervention Strategies*

Hoarders are resistant to changing their behavior and community agencies that deal with hoarding have a low success rate. In the 1996 Frost and Hartl study of hoarding in the community, only 32% of the hoarders willingly cooperated in changing their behaviors, and even then, improvements were often not maintained. Forty percent refused to cooperate at all, and 28% reluctantly agreed to improve conditions but made

few attempts. Animal hoarders are much more resistant to services than non-animal hoarders, with 56% of animal hoarders refusing to cooperate at any level (Patronek, 1999).

Rathbone-McCuan (1996) determined that the following elements are crucial in conducting interventions with self-neglecting elders, which has obvious applicability for interventions with hoarders.

- Sensitivity to the elder's self-esteem and respect for elder's decisions about offered services
- Awareness of motivators to help the elder achieve standards for self-care
- Assessment of functional capabilities and assessment of "both the obvious reasons for client vulnerability and less tangible factors underlying the elder's feelings of self-worth, such as depression, family separation, or the loss of lifetime friends" (p. 50)
- Acknowledgement that elders may have incorrect information or perceptions about services available
- Understanding that elders may not understand the consequences of receiving help
- Recognition that elders may mistrust public agencies
- Patience; though risks may be imminent, elders may be too confused or frightened to make sudden changes or accept services
- Expertise in engaging elders that respects their autonomy and facilitates joint decision-making

- Rather than explaining how help could be advantageous, providing tangible evidence.

One effective model is the Elder Abuse Diagnosis and Intervention (EADI) Model developed by Quinn and Tomita (1997) and applicable to hoarders, self-neglecters, and other victims of elder abuse and neglect. The model is based on crisis intervention and problem solving theories, utilizing a psychoanalytic approach, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and learning theory. The diagnosis phase utilizes traditional psychosocial casework approach and crisis intervention, and incorporates assessment and evaluation. The crisis intervention phase involves educating the client that maltreatment will increase, making a safety plan, prevention, and referral to services. Unwilling clients are assessed for mental and physical capacity. Guardianships are sought for incapacitated elders and elders with capacity are provided written information and plans for follow-up. Quinn and Tomita's crisis intervention approach requires that the practitioner operates as participant-observer and change agent, providing immediate help and cognitive restructuring, with little history-taking.

#### Relevance to Social Work

Not only is the community and its regulatory agencies impacted by hoarding, the field of social work is also affected. The issue of hoarding among elderly women has relevance to the field of social work because of the issues of self-determination, the ethical considerations of a client's right to refuse treatment, and understanding the difference between life-style choice and mental illness. Imbedded in these issues are the lack of consensus about how to provide services to those refusing services, how and at

what point to intervene, and whether life-threatening choices of one's own care is itself demonstration of mental impairment.

Similarly, the issue of hoarding exemplifies the field of social work's internal struggle between the rights of individuals in contrast to the standards, mores, and values of the community. The conflict is illustrated by adult protective services social workers struggling between interventions that include forced guardianship or engaging the hoarder in a systematic removal of hoarded objects.

The conflict between individualism and community is more than an issue of civil rights. The hoarder, particularly an animal hoarder, throws the community at risk of disease and rodent infestation. The hoarder also creates a need for a social response because she is unable or unwilling to affect an individual response to the hoarding. By creating this crisis, the hoarder perpetuates ageist, sexist beliefs about eccentricities and abnormalities accompanying older age for women.

Because APS workers must wrestle with the concepts of individualism or community, self-determination or the rights and mores of society, hoarding as a lifestyle choice or mental illness symptom, and the degree to which individuals have a right to refuse treatment, they bring a perspective to hoarding that is unique. Similarly, APS workers observe hoarding firsthand, often witnessing the extent to which an individual's living conditions are impaired by hoarded clutter. For these reasons and to understand hoarding within a social context, the dissertation research is based on the experiences and perspectives of adult protective services workers.



### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical concepts framing this study are derived by a functionalist paradigm, particularly the writings of Talcott Parsons and Emile Durkheim. Functionalism, like other social order theories, assumes that society is relatively stable, that “every element in society has a function, i.e., renders a contribution to its maintenance as a system” (Burrell & Morgan, 2000, p. 12), and that the functioning social structure relies on a consensus of values. This perspective of stability, integration, functional coordination and consensus is contrasted by conflict theories that are based on assumptions of constant change and coercion, ubiquitous conflict, and members contributing to an ultimate transformation and disintegration of society.

Functionalism was chosen as the theory from which to study hoarding because it allows for the possibility that hoarding is a necessary, important, and enduring aspect of the culture, as well as being necessary, important, and enduring behavior to the lives of hoarders. While functionalism is limited in terms of explaining individual behavior, it offered a unique insight into a phenomenon common across cultures and throughout communities.

#### *Functionalism*

The sociology of regulation includes theorists, such as Durkheim, who explain social phenomenon in terms of unity, cohesion, and how society is maintained as an entity. In contrast, radical change theorists work to explain structural conflict and identify social structures that oppress the masses, such as the work of Marx.

An inherent tension in sociological theory is the objective-subjective debate, in which functionalism is on the objective side in contrast to the subjective interpretive sociological thought. “The functionalist approach to social science tends to assume that the social world is composed of relatively concrete empirical artifacts and relationships which can be identified, studied, and measured through approaches derived from the natural sciences” (Burrell & Morgan, 2000, p. 26).

Parsons proposed that the major functional imperatives characteristic of systems are adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency (pattern maintenance). Behavioral, personality, and social systems are involved in the first three functional imperatives, with the cultural system performing “...the latency function by providing actors with the norms and values that motivate them for action” (Ritzer, 2000, p. 97).

Hoarding represents a failure by the social system to provide certain individuals, typically elderly unmarried women, the norms and values embraced by the rest of society. The issue of hoarding, then, is presented as a social phenomenon that is representative of social cohesion, purposeful in maintaining social order, and can be studied through objective, positivist methods. Hoarding behavior by elderly women, then, is explored through the key functionalist concepts of social order, social integration, socialization, and social functions. The writings of Parsons and Durkheim are referenced frequently as they have made the major contributions to the theory of functionalism.

### *Social Order*

The hoarding elderly woman represents an anomaly in the normative social pattern in that her behavior not only affects society, but she is acting in a manner

contradictory to social expectations of the elderly. Moving away from materialism and towards greater self-reflection and spirituality, a process termed gerotranscendence, typically marks the developmental stage of elderly women.

During this process, an individual moves from feeling deeply connected to the material world to experiencing a more transcendent and cosmically directed sense of connection (i.e., recognizing one's place in the overall flow of life) and wrestling with existential questions regarding one's place in the universe (Degges-White, 2005, p. 37).

The hoarder, however, incites social controversy and notoriety by confounding standards about aging development. As other elderly women are busy in the process of distributing and discarding possessions, hoarding elderly women not only refuse to give away possessions but actively accumulate more objects to add to their seemingly endless collections. Similarly, elderly women, aware of their inevitable death, conventionally evaluate the worth of possessions to determine the rightful heir while hoarding elderly women are ill-equipped to do this evaluation as they value their possessions nearly equally. Their reluctance to evaluate and bequeath possessions speaks to hoarders' strong emotional attachment to their possessions and their attempt to stave off death by clinging to a materialistic life.

Talcott Parsons maintains that the social system is derived by the relations between people, so the participation of a person in a "patterned interactive relationship" significantly affects the individual's status. The functional prerequisites to the social system involve basic needs, such as physical health and safety. Hoarding threatens the

basic functional prerequisites of the social system by exposing members of society to risk of disease and vermin. Hoarding behavior represents not only a failure to comply with social expectations, but also a display of antagonistic social withdrawal. “Precisely because people are dependent on each other’s performances, simple withdrawal from fulfillment of expectations may, motivationally speaking, be a highly aggressive act, and may in fact injure the other severely” (Parsons, 1951, p. 31). Hoarding behavior represents both the failure of hoarders to meet social expectations and the failure of society to socially engage hoarding elderly women.

*Roles.* “...Because of the strong emphasis on community sentiment on the virtues of fidelity and devotion to husband and children, [the role of wife and mother] offers perhaps the highest level of a certain kind of security” (Parsons, 1954, p. 99). Unlike the vast majority of elderly women, though, many hoarding elderly women have never been married and therefore cannot rely on the socially-esteemed role of wife and mother to secure their position in society. Without the role of wife and mother, and having lost the role of employee through retirement, the hoarding elderly woman is alone in interpreting her function in society and what is expected of her. Parsons suggests that

...The impact of indefiniteness of expectations...may be a factor in deepening the vicious circle of progressive motivation to deviance. It may also provide loopholes for those whose motivational patterns leans to non-conformity, in that the very indefiniteness of the expectation makes it impossible to draw a rigid line between conformity and deviance, since this is a matter of “interpretation” (Parsons, 1951, p. 270).

*Status.* Parsons suggests that ranking is an inevitable and that stratification offers the more-esteemed ranks the ability to feel morally superior over the lowest ranks. “There is, in any given social system, an actual system of ranking in terms of moral evaluation,” (Parsons, 1954, p. 71), which Parsons labels a social stratification. Socially unacceptable behavior like hoarding, then, allows for society to marginalize hoarders in order to feel morally superior, sets social standards on the behaviors of individuals, and allows society to impose a vast range of socially-acceptable punishments to hoarders. Hoarding grates against the social order by flaunting an individualism in which a person’s accumulation of useless items is in conflict with a social need for order, simplicity, cleanliness, and regulation.

#### *Social Integration*

As a matter of selective necessity, man is an agent...He is an agent, seeking in every act the accomplishment of some concrete, objective, impersonal end. By force of his being such an agent he is possessed of a taste for effective work, and a distaste for futile effort (Veblen, 1961, p. 558).

Thorstein Veblen theorizes that compulsive consumption is derived from a predatory, aggressive social system in which the acquisition of property is akin to the battle for power and domination. “Tangible evidences of prowess..., trophies of the chase or of the raid, come to be prized as evidence of preeminent force” (Veblen, 1961, p. 558). The acquisition and ownership of possessions, then, establishes a position of power for the owner, and hoarding enables elderly women to transcend their position of social powerlessness conferred on women, unmarried people, and the aged. While the

hoarded possessions offer little social value, their value in a struggle for power is strongly symbolic. Veblen contends that consumption sets a standard that is only temporary in an insatiable drive for greater and greater quantities of possessions.

*Deviance.* Parsons maintains that one of the most essential functional prerequisites in maintaining a social system is that it must have some modicum of control over deviant behaviors.

...Tendencies to deviant behavior on the part of the component actors pose functional “problems” for the social system in the sense that they must be counteracted by “mechanisms of control” unless dysfunctional consequences are to ensue (Parsons, 1951, p. 35).

Hoarding represents this confusion between conformity and deviance as society is conflicted about the extent to which the community has the right to dispose of an individual’s collection of junk. Regulatory social agents, such as adult protective services, law enforcement, building inspectors, health inspectors, and animal control officers exemplify this social conflict as they each have different perspectives on the etiology of hoarding, the appropriate response, and the extent to which community values outweigh individual choices.

*Anomie.* Durkheim contends that modern society allows for a higher level of freedom and greater individualism than primitive societies, but as a result suffer from anomie—“a lack of moral consensus, a confusion of norms and values...It is the structure of society that determines how people behave” (Salerno, 2004, p. 51). Anomie occurs when there is a conflict between members of society and cultural norms and values, such

as the conflict between cultural values and hoarding among unmarried elderly women, one of the most devalued class positions. Functionalists consider this conflict inevitable.

“...Because of their position in the social structure of society, some people are unable to act in accord with normative values. The culture calls for some type of behavior that the social structure prevents from occurring” (Ritzer, 2000, p. 111-112).

Hoarding represents the non-sustainability of society's insatiableness. “It has been claimed, indeed, that human activity naturally aspires beyond assignable limits and sets itself unattainable goals” (Durkheim, 1951, p. 247-248). Hoarding is addressed by a multitude of social agencies empowered to intervene, including law enforcement, the courts, mental health, building inspections, health departments, animal control, adult protective services, and others. These regulatory agencies function as a paternalistic force in conflict with the needs and desires of elderly women. The social anomie results in the regulatory agencies being unable to stop hoarders' relentless drives of acquisition and possession, as well as their inability to reach a consensus on how to stop, prevent, treat, or intervene in hoarding cases.

*Values.* Hoarding is functional in that it perpetuates and justifies ageism, sexism, and prejudices against persons who never marry as hoarders are most commonly elderly unmarried women. Papadopoulos and LaFontaine (2000) suggest that ageism is due to a fear of dependency and death, and victim blaming, paternalistic attitudes towards the old, and lack of elder rights manifest that ageism. Interventions and treatment of hoarding cases, oftentimes involving condemning of the hoarders' house, institutionalization,

forceful removal, and guardianship, exemplify the way that hoarders are denied rights and are treated with victim-blaming, paternalist methods.

The [hoarding] question provokes issues related to client self-determination, how much older people have the right to make choices on how they live, and when is involuntary intervention on someone's behalf justified because the choices they make are thought to be causing harm to themselves or others. In addition to self-determination, the specter of ageism is raised. If the person was twenty-five would involuntary intervention even be a consideration? (Thomas, 1997, p. 45).

### *Socialization*

When members of society compulsively avoid responsibility, the social system counteracts through rejection and alienation. This concept is illustrated through the social reaction to hoarding by the alienation of hoarding elderly women. The public reaction is one of outrage and moral panic, which Lara (2001) suggests is functional in helping conformists feel some sense of superior self-importance.

Whatever their specific cause, and despite their evident irrationality, moral panics do have a clear effect, both in a cultural and a social sense. By focusing on new sources of evil, they draw an exaggerated line between social pollution and the good. This cultural clarification prepares the path for a purging organizational response, for trials of transgressors, for expulsion, and incarceration (Lara, 2001, p. 169).



*Individualism.* Talcott Parsons suggests that while collective consciousness represents the highest moral order, individualism is the lowest moral order. Hoarding, a nonconformist, nonconventional behavior among a socially marginalized population, outrages the community, then, by its disregard for social standards, its rejection of community values, and its ostentatious display of individualism.

“Modest amounts of individuality and deviance are accommodated but more extreme forms must be met by reequilibrating mechanisms” (Ritzer, 2000, p. 102). The way that the social system reequilibrates hoarding is by permitting itself to extract the elderly woman from her home on a temporary or permanent basis and forcefully remove contents of the house. Another method for penalizing individualistic hoarding behavior is by pathologizing it. In fact, many of the news stories and magazine and newspaper articles that discuss hoarding frame the behavior as indicative of a mental illness, though there is no conclusive evidence to support a mental illness model for hoarders. (The literature review examines psychopathology of hoarding in more depth.)

At the same time, the American society has already conceptualized older age as a time in which psychopathology and cognitive dysfunction are normative. The stereotype of the memory-impaired, socially inept, functionally-limited elder is proliferated through the mass media, greeting cards, and entertainment despite the reality that the stereotyped image represents a minority. Elderly unmarried women, already having three strikes against them, are pathologized when they exhibit hoarding behaviors. As witnessed in the Richmond case of the hoarding elderly woman, the first public response is forceful removal of the hoarder, emergency psychiatric evaluation, and disposing of property

without the involvement or consent of the hoarder (Holmberg, 2004). The community never asks itself how they were participated in the social system that allowed for this woman to hoard, nor do they come together to engage the hoarding elderly woman in a mutually beneficial solution.

### *Social Functions*

Papadopoulos and LaFontaine (2000) suggest that elderly abuse and neglect (which includes hoarding, a self-neglecting behavior) is functional as a means of social control, as a means of communication, as a means of reducing stress and frustration, as a way of resolving inner conflict, and as a form of exploitation for personal gain. The authors approach elder abuse causation from a psychological perspective, applying the principles of behavior theory involving the following concepts: (a) behavior is purposeful (it is learned and functional); (b) behavior is gainful (we behave a certain way in anticipation of a gain which includes positive gains and avoidance of negative consequences); and (c) behavior is motivated by internal drives and interests. The same explanatory concepts can be utilized within a social context to explore hoarding as being purposeful, gainful, and motivated by internal drives and interests.

*Purposefulness of hoarding.* Hoarding is purposeful in that it is socially repugnant enough to warrant a social response. By forcing the social system to be aware of the presence and consequences of hoarding, the community is able to clarify its norms of socially acceptable behavior and its standards of cleanliness. By forcing the social system to be aware of the presence of elderly women hoarders, the community is able to justify its ageist and sexist discriminatory practices. By forcing the social system to be

aware of highly individualistic and socially deviant behaviors, the regulatory agents are able to demonstrate their power in establishing and preserving social order.

*Gainfulness of hoarding.* Robert Merton, a structural-functionalist sociological theorist and student of Talcott Parson's, introduced the idea that social problems have both manifest and latent functions. "In simple terms, *manifest functions* are those that are intended, whereas *latent functions* are unintended" (Ritzer, 2000, p. 110-111). Hoarding is manifestly functional in society because a member of society has accepted the role of storing social artifacts for potential future use. The elderly woman who hoards, then, amasses mountains of newspapers in order to archive information and collects worn clothing and toys to share with others. Interviews with hoarding elderly women reveal their need to save objects in the event other members of society will eventually need them (Penzel, n.d.; Rawson, 1997; Strubbe, 2000; Holmberg, 2004).

Here, hoarders save things they believe will be useful to others rather than themselves. They would feel guilty and worry about being neglectful if they didn't have these things around for others who might need them someday. They may also feel guilty if they don't save a potentially useful item that could be repaired or recycled rather than discarded or wasted (Penzel, n.d., p. 2).

Similarly, animal hoarders justify their collection of animals by saying that they are doing a community service by taking in animals others don't want, thereby preventing euthanasia (Duggan & Smith, 2005; Patronek, 1999; White, 1999;).

The latent, unintended social function of hoarding is that hoarding establishes a tension between self-determination versus regulation, individual values versus

community standards, community acceptance versus social order, and individuality versus conformity. These tensions are exemplified in the confusion between regulatory agencies in how to intervene in hoarding cases, particularly cases that do not involve animals. While a self-deterministic model engages the hoarder in sorting and disposing of her possessions, the more common intervention involves instituting social order and arbitrary disposal of possessions in which the hoarder plays no role except as victimized client.

The unanticipated consequences of hoarding are those results wanted by neither the hoarder nor society. The hoarder risks impairment by objects falling on her and frequently has no use of appliances, fixtures, and furniture as they are utilized as storage areas. “A study of elderly hoarders found that hoarding constituted a physical health threat to 81% of them, including threat of fire hazard, falling unsanitary conditions, and inability to prepare food” (Saxena & Maidment, 2004, p. 1144). She must often navigate over and around piles of junk, a problem if aging restricts her mobility. Spouses leave. Hoarders are evicted. “Several years ago in our area, a case was reported of a woman who burned to death in a house filled with newspapers” (Penzel, n.d., p. 2).

The community suffers the consequences of hoarding by being exposed to contagious diseases, rodents and vermin, and the unsightliness of junk-filled yards. Hoarded animals suffer the most horrific unintended consequences as their health has been so impaired that they must often be euthanized, as in the Fairfax county case in which the hoarder, while believing she was providing a benevolent kill-free animal

rescue home, neglected her cats' health so severely that over 400 cats had to be euthanized (Duggan & Smith, 2005).

*Hoarding as motivated by internal drives.* Hoarding represents an instinctive, innate, and internal motivation. "One study found that 84% of compulsive hoarders reported a family history of hoarding behaviors in at least one first-degree relative..." (Saxena & Maidment, 2004, p. 1144).

As explored in more detail in the literature review, hoarding is based on internal drives of acquisition and possessiveness, which is not only socially acceptable but is a cultural norm. In other words, there is a collective inclination for hoarding from which individual inclinations are derived. The attempts by organized religion, particularly Buddhism, to persuade congregants to detach from acquisition and possessiveness is fairly much in vain. Universally, possessions have emotional meaning and functionality to their owners. Hoarded objects carry similar emotional meaning and functionality to the hoarders despite the fact that the objects are either unappealing to other members of society or even disgusting.

### Conclusion

The issue of hoarding is worthy of research study as it has implications as a social issue as well as an individual's rights to self-determination. The literature review section that follows outlines the relevant research that explores hoarding, but the overarching question throughout this dissertation is: Why do some elderly women choose to hoard? In what ways is it functional and purposeful? How do adult protective services perceive hoarding among elderly women? The literature review highlights the research that has

investigated hoarding and the research methodology offers avenues to explore hoarding as a functional behavior. Functional concepts provide an explanatory response about how hoarding meets needs of both the individual and the culture.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

Literature about hoarding seems to typically center on pathology, mental illness, and an illness model, with no integration of the literature about the sociological and cultural connection to the meanings and functionality of possessions. This literature review, as well as the dissertation itself, strives to integrate and bridge the two paths of thought.

### History of Literature About Hoarding

Research on hoarding has primarily focused on etiology, with some studies on characteristics, descriptions, and prevalence of hoarding. The findings on these studies are presented in the following sections. Literature comes from the fields of social work, psychology, medicine, veterinary science, psychiatry, sociology, consumerism, and anthropology.

The earliest literature on hoarding and self-neglect focuses primarily on men, though the issue affects both genders. This dissertation focuses predominantly on hoarding elderly women because more elderly women hoard than elderly men or younger women. Elderly women are also more likely than other sub-populations to be socially stigmatized, particularly unmarried women, which allows the study of hoarding among elderly women as a social issue. At the same time, many of the case studies, literature

findings, and dissertation results include both genders because there are very few studies available that exclude by age or gender.

### *Case Studies*

Compulsive hoarding came into public awareness during the 1940s, when newspapers reported on how the Collyer brothers crammed their 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue mansion from floor to ceiling with 136 tons of hoarded junk. Between 1933 and 1948, Langley Collyer added to his piles items from trashcans.

Both he and his invalid brother, Homer, were found dead among possessions that included 11 pianos and all the components of a Model T Ford. Langley was actually crushed by a falling heap of heavy items he had rigged as a booby trap for burglars (Penzel, n.d., p. 3).

The first research case study found relevant to hoarding was conducted by Clark, Mankikar, and Gray (1975) in which 30 elderly hospital patients demonstrating extreme self-neglect were administered the intellectual rating scale (I.R.S.), intelligent quotient, Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, and Cattell's Method for Personality. Testing revealed high intelligence and no significant personality disorders among the 16 women and 14 men, yet they exhibited poor self-awareness, severe hoarding behaviors, poor nutrition and health, and typically rejected offers of assistance. Similar to later research, the individuals with hoarding behaviors neither sought nor accepted social contact.

In forming an explanation, Clark (1975), a consulting physician to the Geriatrics Department at a hospital in England, labeled this the Diogenes Syndrome after the 400 B.C. Greek philosopher Diogenes who begged for food and exhibited a lack of shame.



He suggested that the hoarding was due to either (a) a reaction to social or psychological stress, (b) a lack of initiative to sort and throw away useless items or due to a belief that items may be useful in the future, (c) a lifelong proclivity to giving personal care a low priority, or (d) a reaction to bereavement, retirement, or other changes.

Money shortage did not appear to be a problem and some patients showed “imaginary poverty,” accepting food from neighbours and refusing to spend on essentials. The most marked case seen was a man with investments of £1/2 million; others hoarded secret wealth and posed as paupers (Clark, 1975, p. 801).

The O’Rawe (1982) case study of John, a hospital patient, showed a 20-year decline following his retirement. While at the hospital, John ate balanced meals, conversed intelligently, bathed and washed without persuasion, and had a friendly, outgoing personality. However, at home, John lived like a hermit, was habitually unkempt and dirty, and behaved bizarrely, subsisting entirely on potatoes and cake. He had plenty of money but hoarded useless items and trash, and refused help. O’Rawe concluded that life experiences, environment, motivation, resources, health, age, skills, values, beliefs, habits, culture, and knowledge of self were significant influences on John’s ability to care for himself.

In more recent years, case studies by Thomas (1997) and Franks et al. (2004) illustrated that hoarders may have cognitive disorders and/or mental illness challenges, but some hoarders demonstrate no apparent disorders. The Thomas case study of six hoarders and the Franks study of four hoarders found that early intervention, consistent

and frequent case management, multidisciplinary collaboration, and thorough assessments are key in intervening in hoarding cases.

Case studies of hoarding and self-neglecting elders determined that hoarding/self-neglecting elders typically live alone, are above average in intelligence, and often suffer from a mobility-restricting disability. They have little food in the home, yet frequently present a pattern of syillogomania (hoarding of trash and rubbish). They tend to be socially isolated, exhibit little shame for their condition and typically refuse assistance (Byers & Zeller, 1995; Franks et al., 2004; and Thomas, 1997).

#### *Stories in the News*

One of the most horrific cases of hoarding was discovered by the city inspections department of St. Paul-Minneapolis in May, 1988. Three children under the age of 10, including a two-year-old boy, had been abandoned by their parents and lived in filthy conditions where rotten food, garbage, clothing, catalogs, and newspapers were piled as high as four feet. The oldest boy patterned the upkeep of the house after his parents' example of squalor as he attempted to raise his young sister and brother.

“Nobody came to our house. Inside, it was just trash, newspapers, pizza boxes, buckets of, you know, stuff, every type of litter you could imagine. Somebody later called it chaos. I tried to get it cleaned up but that was hopeless. I thought for a while it might be normal, but then I figured out it wasn't” (Rawson, 1997, p. 7).

Other articles in the news repeat the same story of social isolation, despair, and chaos. A Minneapolis house, occupied by an elderly woman, was cluttered with trash, had no

functional plumbing, and contained hoarded objects sufficient to be considered a serious fire hazard.

A grand piano sat in the living room under piles of aluminum cans, microwave food cartons, and filthy clothing. “It seemed,” inspector Jim Strong said after reviewing the file, “that nobody went to visit her anymore, so any reason to keep things from turning into chaos were gone” (Rawson, 1997, p. 5).

In Virginia, the public became aware of the serious issue of animal hoarding through the news accounts of Ruth Knueven in Fairfax county. Fairfax county police confiscated 487 cats from Knueven, 82, and cited her for obstructing justice by refusing to surrender her cats. Because nearly all of the cats were undomesticated and suffered from contagious respiratory problems, nearly all of the cats had to be euthanized. “Knueven said she started collecting the strays in the neighborhood years ago to protect them from being hit by cars and shelter them from the elements” (Duggan & Smith, 2005, B01). In Albemarle, Virginia, animal control officers removed 34 dogs from a residence after the homeowner’s daughter called the county for help. The dogs’ veterinary care cost the local SPCA thousands of dollars, with 23 of the dogs having to be euthanized (Mayhew, 2005).

The news articles illustrate the way in which hoarders have been neglected by society and how the hoarded items creates a community problem due to the proliferation of rodents and disease. Additionally, news stories highlight the subtle and overt tension between the rights, needs, and lifestyle choices of hoarders against the concerns, worries, and rights of the community at large.

### *Empirical Research*

Because most literature about hoarding comes from the fields of community health and adult protective services, the context and focus of intervention vary. While Adult Protective Services (APS) reports focus on the self-neglect of the individual, the reports to health departments focus on the individual's poor living conditions. The studies that address hoarding in the community include: (a) a survey to health departments in Massachusetts of cases opened during a five-year period (Frost, Steketee, & Williams, 2000), (b) a nationwide survey to adult protective services departments of cases opened during a two-week period (National Association of Adult Protective Services Administrators, 1991), (c) a survey interview to professionals who have witnessed during the last year at least one client over the age of 64 with a hoarding problem (Steketee et al., 2001), and (d) a series of instruments administered to community volunteers and students (Frost & Gross, 1993). The focus is on hoarding among the elderly because "...studies have consistently found that hoarding individuals were significantly older than non-hoarding individuals, possibly because hoarding problems increase in severity with age" (Steketee, Frost, & Kim, 2001, p. 177).

#### *Survey to Health Departments*

In the 2000 study by Frost, Steketee, and Williams, a survey to health departments found a total of 471 cases of hoarding reported. Projected per capita incidences of compulsive hoarding are 26 per 1,000 persons. Demographics and descriptions include:

- 75% of hoarders lived in single family dwellings; 18% lived in apartments
- 64% lived in suburban areas; 21% lived in urban areas; 16% lived in rural areas

- 88% of the cases reported were due to unsanitary conditions and the accumulation of junk
- 52% of the homes were cluttered outside
- Hoarded objects were primarily in the living rooms (90% of cases), kitchen (79%, and bedroom (79%), with the attic being the least (41% of cases) cluttered area in the home.
- Newspapers and magazines were collected most frequently (88.5% of cases indicating at least moderate hoarding), followed by containers (87%), bottles (80%), and food/food garbage (76%).
- Nearly one-third (32%) hoarded animals.

Health and safety concerns most prevalent include: (a) clutter inhibited normal movement (86% of cases); (b) restricted access to food preparation (80%); and (c) poor basic hygiene (88%). Half of the hoarders in the study indicated no awareness of the problem.

#### *Nationwide Self-Neglect Study*

Hoarding cases presented to adult protective services (APS) are categorized under the abuse type “self-neglect.”

Self-neglect is the result of the adult’s inability, due to physical and/or mental impairments or diminished capacity, to perform essential self-care tasks including: providing essential food, clothing, shelter, and medical care; obtaining goods and services necessary to maintain physical health, mental health, emotional well-being and general safety; and/or managing financial affairs

(National Association of Adult Protective Services Administrators [NAAPSA], 1991, p. 2-3).

A nationwide survey of 2,084 APS case records opened for founded (substantiated) self-neglect cases revealed the following descriptors. Because hoarding is only one aspect of self-neglect, the subject clients may not necessarily demonstrate hoarding behavior. However, it is essential to include the self-neglecting population in a discussion about hoarding because investigations of self-neglecters open one of very few available paths of discovery into the lives of hoarders.

- While 51% of the American population is women, 65% of self-neglecters are women
- While 17% of the population is elderly (over age 64), 74% of the self-neglecters are elderly. A high 19% of self-neglecters are 85 years and older, in comparison to only 2% of the population.
- While 31% of the elderly population in the U.S. live alone, 53% of the elderly self-neglecters live alone.
- While 73% of the U.S. elderly population has contact with relatives at least every two weeks, only 57% of elderly self-neglecters have contact with relatives at least every two weeks, with little age differences in self-neglecters.

The study found that alcoholism is prevalent among self-neglecters, especially among individuals under age 65. While a high 20% of self-neglecters abuse alcohol, only 10% of adults in the community abuse alcohol. Over half of the self-neglecters need help with

bathing, meal preparation, taking medication, grocery shopping, housework, and bill-paying.

Most self-neglecters live alone, increasing the risk of malnourishment and poor living conditions. Among self-neglecters who have rare social contact, 62% have poor living conditions in contrast to 36% of self-neglecters with frequent social contact.

Malnutrition is highest in male self-neglecters who live alone. (NAAPSA, 1991).

Similar findings were reported in the 1998 National Incidence Study by the National Center on Elder Abuse. The National Incidence Study collected incidence and demographic data on elder abuse, neglect, and self-neglect from a quota sample of adult protective services agencies and community agencies serving the elderly in 20 nationally representative counties in 15 states. The definition of self-neglect, similar to the NAAPSA definition, involves non-voluntary behaviors threatening health and safety, but only the NAAPSA definition includes disability as a required characteristic. The cross-sectional National Incidence Study supported the NAAPSA self-neglect study findings that self-neglecting elders tend to be female (65%), over age 75 (65%), and suffer from some degree of confusion (75%) (National Center on Elder Abuse, 1998).

#### *Survey Interview of Providers*

In the 2001 study by Steketee, Frost, and Kim, a total of 36 service providers who work with hoarding elderly clients were interviewed. The demographics of the 62 cases reported include the following descriptors.

- Most (73%) elderly hoarders were women
- Mean age was 77 years old

- Fifty-eight percent lived alone, with over half never married. Never-married hoarders had more clutter and more interference from clutter than hoarders who had been married.
- Most elderly hoarders lived in an urban location, primarily in apartments (50%) or single family homes (34%)
- Among providers with frequent contact with their hoarding clients, an estimated 44% of hoarding elders had a mental disorder, 33% had a suspected mental disorder, and 22% had no apparent mental disorder.
- The most frequent confirmed or suspected disorder was depression (38%), personality disorder (17%), paranoia (14%), and anxiety disorder (14%), with few exhibiting bipolar or psychotic disorders, agoraphobia, or substance abuse.
- Few (2 – 7%) clients indicated a diagnosis of or symptoms of an obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Similar to other studies, elderly clients commonly hoarded newspapers and other print materials, containers, and food. Rooms with the most substantial clutter included living rooms, dining rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms, with providers rating 92 to 96% of the rooms as showing severe hoarding.

#### *Study Comparing Hoarders and Non-Hoarders*

In the study conducted by Frost and Gross (1993), hoarders were less frequently married than non-hoarders; 45% of hoarders were married as compared to 80% of non-hoarding subjects. A coinciding study of a sample of 90 students with hoarding behaviors found that the most common items hoarded were clothing (86% of students),



magazines (59%), bags (43%), books (40%), school papers (37%), and cards or letters (31%) (Frost & Gross, 1993).

### *Self-Neglect*

Case and empirical studies have typically shown that solitude is the most likely predictor of self-neglect (Clark, 1975; Cornwall, 1981; NAAPSA, 1991; O’Rawe, 1982; Quinn & Tomita, 1997). Clark’s 1975 longitudinal availability study of 14 male and 16 female hospitalized elders found that most ( $n = 28$ , 93%) lived alone and few ( $n = 8$ , 27%) had relatives in the area. Some self-neglecting elders were divorced or widowed, with no children or children who lived far away. Some self-neglecting elders had been loners for their lifetime, often preferring the company of animals to people.

While social work literature identifies poverty as a risk factor (NAAPSA, 1991), medical and nursing journals have found that self-neglecting elders commonly have adequate financial resources (Clark, 1975; Clark et al., 1975; Cornwall, 1981; O’Rawe, 1982). The difference in findings among the disciplines may be attributable to the difference in sample size and design, with social work literature based on a large sample of adult protective services records and the medical literature based on case studies of elders who present themselves at hospitals. NAAPSA studied 1,327 elders while medical practitioners studied small samples (Clark, 1975 with  $n = 30$ ; Clark et al., 1975 with  $n = 30$ ; Cornwall, 1981 with  $n = 1$ ; O’Rawe, 1982 with  $n = 1$ ).

The level of mental impairment among hoarders has rarely been empirically studied. Clark’s study of 30 elders hospitalized for acute, previously untreated illnesses was unable to find impairments of mental health or intelligence. In an effort to explore if

“this social and clinical picture may represent a syndrome” (Clark et al., 1975, p. 366), Clark collected social and environmental data and administered the Intelligence Rating Scale, the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, and Cattell’s Method for Personality. Results indicated high intelligence ( $M = 115$ ,  $R = 97 - 134$ ) and intellectual preservation ( $M = 14$ ,  $R = 10 - 17$ ) with no significant personality disorders (Clark et al., 1975).

### *Animal Hoarding*

Animal hoarding represents a much more problematic phenomenon because the consequences are deleterious to the hoarding individual, the kept animals, and the surrounding community. In a nationwide study of 54 cases of animal hoarding, Patronek (1999) found the following case characteristics:

- Unsanitary conditions were reported in 76% of the cases
- Neglect of animals was common in most cases, with 59% of cases having animals needing medical attention and 40% of animals being malnourished
- In 80% of cases, animals were found dead or in very poor condition
- Cats were involved in 65% of cases, followed by dogs (60%), farm animals (11%) and birds (11%)
- Animals were acquired primarily through unplanned breeding in the household (39%) or intentionally seeking/acquiring strays (26%)
- The majority of hoarders (76%) were female
- Most hoarders were elderly (46% over age 60; 37% 40 – 59 years old; 11% less than 40)
- Most (72%) were single, divorced, or widowed

Hoarders typically justified their large collections of animals by saying they “love” their animals, that the animals represent surrogate children, or they expressed fears that the animals would be euthanized if taken to an animal shelter or that “no one else would care for the animals” (Patronek, 1999, p. 85). Quoted in a newspaper article, Patronek concluded the following.

...Ultimately, it’s not about sheltering or rescuing...The explanation that they’re running a sanctuary or shelter is just really disingenuous. They may in their own heads somewhat believe that. But it’s really about the animals providing them with something, not vice versa...It’s about (the animals) fulfilling a human need they have (Duggan & Smith, 2005, p. B01).

In a study utilizing the same reporting instrument utilized by Patronek, the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (Arluke et al., 2002) reviewed 71 case reports from 28 states and one Canadian province. The results were similar to the findings of the Patronek study.

- The majority of hoarders (83%) were female
- The median age was 55 years for women and 53 years for men
- Most (72%) of the hoarders were single, divorced, or widowed
- The total number of animals hoarded ranged from 10 to 918
- Women were more likely than men to have more than 100 animals
- Mean number of animals was 56 for men and 90 for women
- Cats were involved in 82% of cases, followed by dogs (55%), farm animals (11%) and birds (17%)

- Median number of animals was 47 for men and 50 for women
- There was no apparent relationship between age group of the hoarders and animal population
- In 17% of the cases, the residence was condemned as being unfit for human habitation and 25% of the hoarders were placed in protective custody

Reasons for accumulating animals include: loving the animals (80%), to save the animals (68%), nobody else would care for them (52%), animals were their only friend (39%), and the animals functioned as surrogate children (37%).

Similarly, animal control inspectors often witness animal hoarders who have benevolent intentions but are neglecting their pets. In some cases, individuals started collecting animals following a loss or tragedy in their lives and they believe the animals are better off with them than anyone else. The approach used by animal control inspectors is to tread very carefully when attempting to intervene and to work on eliciting cooperation from the hoarder. ““We always, always, always try to handle these situations without going to court (for a warrant)” (McKenzie, 2002, p. K0611).

#### *Hoarding Among The Elderly*

While research indicates that hoarding increases with age (Hartl & Frost, 1999), there is no empirical research that compares hoarding patterns between elderly and non-elderly persons, and the only journal article about hoarding by elderly persons is limited to one study by Gail Steketee, Randy Frost, and Hyo-Jin Kim (2001). In this study, researchers interviewed 36 service providers who work with elders and have witnessed compulsive hoarding (defined as significant clutter, inability to use living space, and

impaired functioning due to hoarding.) Similar to studies that included all age ranges, the elder hoarders in this study most frequently collected newspapers, containers, and paper trash, which were kept primarily in the living room, dining room, kitchen, and bedroom. The service providers suggested that the hoarding was due to affective, personality, psychotic, or anxiety disorders, but the lack of assessment and the absence of direct diagnoses precludes a conclusion. The researchers' hypotheses about elders having cognitive deficits were not supported as only 24% of the hoarders demonstrated an apparent cognitive disorder.

While almost all elderly clients received services, many hoarders were resistant to case management or homemaker services. Never-married elders were especially resistant to services, particularly involuntary cleaning of homes. Effective treatment necessitates "modification of faulty beliefs, assistance with organizing and decision making, and examination of emotional attachment and behaviors that promote hoarding" (Steketee et al., 2001, p. 188).

#### Characteristics and Descriptions

Over half of hoarders have never married, a very high number since nearly all elders (95%) have been married at some point in their lives. Similar to elderly hoarders, animal hoarders did not understand the extent to which hoarding created problems. Patronek found that less than a third of the hoarders willingly cooperated in resolving the problem. Though most promised to comply, few made any attempts. In 11% of the cases, residences were condemned as unfit for human habitation and 26% of animal hoarders were institutionalized (Patronek, 1999).

### Prevalence

Varying definitions of hoarding, as well as a wide difference in prevalence methodologies and units of analyses complicates the ability to project the prevalence of hoarding or generalize results. The estimates of hoarding in the United States range from 4 cases per 10,000 population (Arluke et al., 2002) to 26 cases of hoarding per 1,000 population (Frost et al., 2000). The 1991 National Association of Adult Protective Services Administrators (NAAPSA) national study estimated a total of 631,000 elderly self-neglecters in the United States, or about 2% of the elderly population, suggesting a widespread and acute problem of hoarding among the elderly. The study estimated that the number of self-neglecters will rise exponentially due to rising numbers of the elderly and over-84 population, less accessible and affordable health and mental health care, greater public awareness and reporting, and increasing poverty and social isolation.

Animal hoarding is much less prevalent. A nationwide study projected a prevalence rate of 700 to 2,000 cases per year, affecting 1,200 to 1,600 animals per year, or about one case in every one million persons. “Because of the secretive nature of hoarders, their tendency to repeat the behavior, and the lack of an investigating agency in some communities, the true prevalence is undoubtedly much higher” (Patronek, 1999, p. 87).

### Etiology

Literature about the roots of hoarding seem to fit into one of the following three categories—hoarding as a symptom of psychopathology; hoarding as a representation of self-neglecting behaviors; and hoarding as a manifestation of idiosyncratic belief

systems. Other explanations of hoarding can be extrapolated from literature about instinct, attachment to possessions, and meanings about possessions.

A related etiology under current study is that hoarding is derived from brain injury. In a recent study at the University of Iowa (“Secret of Compulsive Hoarding Revealed,” 2003,) a team of neuroscientists found that injury to the right mesial prefrontal cortex in the brain was common among pathological hoarders. While the mesial prefrontal cortex can typically differentiate between valuable and useless objects, and can limit obsessive collecting, “when it is damaged, the more primitive collecting drive comes to the fore” (p. 17). In similar research, hoarders have been found to have a unique pattern of brain activity, different from both people with obsessive compulsive disorders and people with no obsession or compulsion disorders. “Our findings suggest that the compulsive hoarding syndrome may be neurobiologically distinct variant of OCD” (Saxena & Maidment, 2004, p. 1147).

The categories of psychopathology, self-neglect, belief systems, instinct, attachment to possessions, and meanings of possessions are explored as possible etiology to explain hoarding behavior. The study of hoarding through these various categories allows the opportunity to examine hoarding as a symptom, a behavior, a phenomenon, and a social issue.

A common speculation that has found no evidence is that hoarding is due to suffering through the Great Depression or other deprivation during early years, although many of the current elderly hoarders were born well after the Depression ended. To prove this hypothesis, one would expect to find hoarders saving functional objects for

future use and that hoarding behavior would have an early onset, yet these indicators have not been observed. Instead, hoarders typically collect non-functional objects of little value or utility (Frost & Gross, 1993; Frost, Hartl, Christian & Williams, 1995; Steketee et al., 2001.) In a study of hoarders in the community, researchers "...found that hoarders save the same types of objects as nonhoarders, hoarders report more hoarding relatives than nonhoarders, hoarders are very worried about not having an object when it is needed, and there is no evidence that hoarders experienced higher levels of early deprivation than nonhoarders" (Cermele, Melendez-Pallitto & Pandina, 2001, p. 216.) Furthermore, hoarding has been observed across socioeconomic strata, so poverty has not been an issue contributing to hoarding, even though some hoarders take food and clothing from their neighbors.

Studies about hoarding onset have been inconclusive, with some studies finding that hoarding originates during childhood (Frost et al., 1995), while other studies find hoarding onset in early adult years (Greenberg, 1987) or later life (Clark et al., 1975). Individuals who hoard animals were found to have had strong attachments to animals during their childhood years, a time in which the individual suffered from serious neglect and the animals represented the only positive attachment in their life. The need for animals disappeared during early adulthood but then resurfaced later in life (Duggan & Smith, 2005). Many studies found that the most common hoarders were those over age 60, particularly animal hoarders, (Arluke et al., 2002; Clark, 1975; Clark et al., 1975; Patronek, 1999; Steketee et al., 2001), suggesting onset in middle age or later.



### *Psychopathology*

Psychologists and psychiatrists debate the extent to which hoarding is a symptom of mental illness. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition (*DSM-IV*, 1994) identifies hoarding as a symptom of obsessive-compulsive personality disorder when an individual amasses “worn out or worthless objects even when they have no sentimental value” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 673). Individuals with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), Alzheimer’s, attachment disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, anorexia, schizophrenia, psychoses, and other disorders frequently display hoarding behaviors (Cermele et al., 2001; Frost & Hartl, 1996; Frost, Kim, Morris, Bloss, Murray-Close & Steketee, 1998; Greenberg, Witzum & Levy, 1990; Saxena & Maidment, 2004; Stein, 1993). Among obsessive-compulsive disorder patients, for example, 18 - 42% show hoarding or saving compulsions, depending on the research study (Frost et al., 1998; Saxena & Maidment, 2004).

One of the first references to hoarding as a characteristic of mental illness was during Greenberg’s (1987) presentation of four cases of compulsive hoarding. All four cases demonstrated a preoccupation with hoarding to the exclusion of work and family, showed diminished insight and little interest in receiving treatment, and indicated no attempt to curb their compulsion. Unlike other research during the time, Greenberg suggested that hoarding has several features distinguishing it from classic obsessive-compulsive disorder, and that none of the cases were considered depressed. While the patients denied or minimized the hoarding, they agreed their hoarding was excessive and irrational and they presented rationalizations about the objects being useful or sellable.

One feature distinguishing hoarding from obsessive compulsive disorder is the emotional attachment to possessions. While individuals with obsessive-compulsive disorder have little sentimental attachment to their possessions, hoarders strongly and emotionally attach to their possessions (Frost et al., 1995)

Compared to non-hoarding OCD patients, hoarders have more severe anxiety, depression, personality disorder symptoms, family and social disability, and lower global functioning. Hoarders do not respond to SRI (serotonin reuptake inhibitor) and serotonergic medication, while individuals with severe OCD respond well to a combination of medication and therapy (Saxena & Maidment, 2004; Steketee & Frost, 2003; Wilhelm, Tolin, & Steketee, 2004).

In other studies in which individuals with hoarding behaviors have been tested for mental illness, hoarding behaviors were not significantly contributable to depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, or psychosis (Cooney & Hamid, 1995; Cornwall, 1981; Frost et al., 1995; Greenberg, 1987; Vostanis & Dean, 1992). In a study of 101 female undergraduate students and 52 community volunteers, Frost et al. found no correlation between hoarding and obsessive compulsive behavior, as measured by the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory I - II (MCM I-II) instrument.

Similarly, Ball, Bauer, and Otto (1996) support the finding of a low OCD-hoarding relationship through their review of 65 OCD studies. By classifying patients according to symptom subtype, the study determined that the majority of OCD patients (75%) primarily presented with cleaning and/or checking compulsions, while other compulsions, such as exactness, counting, hoarding, or slowness rituals, comprised only

12% of the patients. Furthermore, treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder has not been generalizable to hoarding symptoms, further suggesting that hoarding has some distinctive qualities apart from OCD.

Despite the differences between hoarding and obsessive-compulsive disorder, some symptoms are common between hoarding and obsessive-compulsive disorder patients, including an exaggerated sense of responsibility, perfectionism, procrastination, difficulty with decision-making, and resistance to treatment and intervention. These symptoms were discussed in the studies of hoarders (Frost & Hartl, 1996; Frost et al., 1995; Saxena & Maidment, 2004; Steketee et al., 2003) and studies of individuals with obsessive compulsive disorders (Foa et al., 2003; Rachman, 1993).

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) lists hoarding as a symptom of an obsessive-compulsive disorder, as well as an obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. The extent to which hoarding represents a personality disorder as opposed to a deviant behavior and thought process is unclear.

#### *Hoarding as a Self-Neglect Behavior*

Self-neglect is the state of an adult's inability, due to physical and/or mental impairments or diminished capacity, to perform essential self-care tasks including: providing essential food, clothing, shelter and medical care; obtaining goods and services necessary to maintain physical health, mental health, emotional well-being and general safety; and/or managing financial affairs (NAAPSA, 1991, p. 4).

Similar to not washing, eating, or taking prescribed medication, hoarding is often considered a self-neglect behavior. Self-neglect is the most common type of elder abuse and neglect, comprising about half of the cases investigated by adult protective services (Jones, 1996). “The concept of self-neglect is complex. Most individuals engage in some behavior or activity that could, in a broad sense, constitute self-neglect” (O’Brien, Thibault, Turner, & Laird-Fick, 1999, p. 2), such as driving too fast, eating fast food, drinking alcohol excessively, neglecting to get medical exams, not wearing seat belts, etc. O’Brien proposes a self-neglect definition based on mental/physical incapacity and intentional neglect. The study points out that self-neglect, like hoarding, is very often not purposeful and not intended to end life immediately, but the behaviors are potentially harmful and the effects are cumulative.

Self-neglect and hoarding behaviors are not confined to the community but are often evidenced in assisted living facilities and nursing homes. Rathbone-McCuan and Fabian (1992) suggest that in these situations, self-neglect is motivated by secondary gains, such as retaining self-worth and having needs met. Self-neglecters may get more attention from staff and special food, or self-neglect may be functional because it represents a way to fight back authoritarian, direct care services. “(Self-neglect) is fraught with conceptual complexity and ethical ambiguity” (Rathbone-McCuan & Fabian, 1992, p. 3).

Two major theoretical concepts about self-neglect involve the study of self-neglect within an elder abuse protection model and the issue of self-determination and personal safety. Although the victim and the perpetrator are the same person in self-

neglect cases, self-neglect is considered an aspect of elder abuse, in conjunction with physical abuse, caregiver neglect, sexual abuse, financial exploitation, and emotional abuse by caregivers. The model of protecting self-neglecters grew from practices that investigate and challenge victimizing caregivers and protect vulnerable adults. The same model, though, may not be adaptable to self-neglecting elders because the harm is to the self, the behavior is not necessarily criminal, and intervention may be contrary to the client's best interests (Pillemer & Wolf, 1986; Quinn & Tomita, 1997).

The protection of elders is based on child protection models despite the dissimilarities. A child is assumed to require custodial authority; an elder is assumed competent to make personal life decisions. A parent has a legal obligation to support and care for the child; an elder has no legal obligation to provide an uncluttered home for her/himself. The state assumes society's *parens patriae* responsibility for abused children and may mandate foster care placement; the removal of an adult due to self-neglect would "...seldom be appropriate, and, in fact, this possibility is of real concern as a possible outcome of elder abuse investigations" (Pillemer & Wolf, 1986, p. 335). In attempting to balance individualistic issues of self-determination and personal safety, social workers and medical practitioners strongly support a position of noninterference (Byers & Lamanna, 1993; Cornwall, 1981; Quinn & Tomita, 1997; Valentine & Cash, 1986).

### *Theory*

Psychosocial theories about self-neglecting elders focus primarily on the perceived value of the elderly, from either society's perspective and/or the perspective of

the elder. Exchange theory, for example, has been used to explain how individuals in America lose social status as their economic and social power diminishes in older age. Although typically used to explain elder abuse and neglect, exchange theory is applicable to elders with financial resources who prefer cluttered and dangerous living conditions. “In our fast-moving technological society, older people are often seen as having nothing to offer, as being in the way of ‘progress,’ or as having no future...Aging or infirmity has become a stigma” (Quinn & Tomita, 1997, p. 117). Elders neglect their living conditions or chronic illnesses in order to assert mastery at a time when they are losing control over other aspects in their lives, and their social value is diminishing.

As people age, they may have less mobility and functionality, fewer support systems, and decreased earnings and employment potential, so choosing an idiosyncratic, anti-social lifestyle allows elders some control in their environments (Quinn & Tomita, 1997). Losses, unclear ideas about what to expect in old age, drop in public status, and eroding of supports leads to feelings of uselessness and obsolescence in old age, much like the uselessness and obsolescence of objects hoarded. “...For some people, aging can assume a pathological flavor because changes in the social environment cause individuals to doubt their social competence, which leads to low self-assessment and a continuing reduction of previously employed coping skills” (Rathbone-McCuan, 1996, p. 368.) Rathbone-McCuan also notes that appropriate role models for aging are absent, social benefits are inadequate, and elders’ medical and psychiatric needs are often unmet.

Elder abuse has also been examined through symbolic interactionism concepts, (Pillemer & Wolf, 1986) though no literature found directly explores self-neglect or

hoarding from a symbolic interactionism perspective. The social interactions that develop and maintain self-neglecting behaviors may be symbolic interactions. Elders with little contact with friends and family, for example, may hoard food and trash in an attempt to demonstrate that they need attention and care, or their self-neglecting behaviors may represent acceptance of ageism and acquiescence of the social standard to not ask for assistance.

Some theorists suggest that elder self-neglect exemplifies indirect self-destructive behaviors that are covert attempts at suicide (Braun, Wykle, & Cowling, 1988; McIntosh & Hubbard, 1988). Within the context of hoarding, then, the premise is that the hoarder increasingly jeopardizes his own safety by an ever-multiplying accumulation of unneeded objects. Very typical of hoarders, individuals who manifest indirect self-destructive behaviors show a serious lack of self-awareness or concern of the consequences of destructive behaviors and the person does not consider him/herself suicidal.

Another theoretical explanation for self-neglect, with applicability to hoarding, is continuity theory. Bozinovski suggests that self-neglecters expend tremendous energy in sustaining self-continuity by preserving identity and protecting/remaining in their preferred environments, two major concepts of continuity theory. “Continuity thus refers to the perception of maintaining a coherence of one’s inner psychic and external environmental and interactional activities” (Bozinovski, 2000, p. 42).

The principles of behavior theory relevant to hoarding involve the following concepts: behavior is purposeful (i.e., behavior is learned and functional); behavior is gainful (individuals behave a certain way in anticipation of a gain which includes positive

gains and avoidance of negative consequences); and behavior is motivated by internal drives and interest. They suggest that abuse and neglect are functional as (a) a means of social control; (b) a means of communication; (c) a means of reducing stress and frustration; (d) a way of resolving inner conflict; and (e) a form of exploitation for personal gain (Papadopoulos & LaFontaine 2000). Hoarding can be applied within this behavioral model in the following ways.

*A means of social control.* The concept of “gerotranscendence” suggests that as people age and move towards the end of their lives, their focus becomes more inward and spiritual, and they withdraw from social contact (Degges-White, 2005). The social isolation, potentially misconstrued as depression or dementia, allows the elder time for self-reflection, validation, and a more universal and spiritual connection than was possible in earlier years.

College educated...at a time when education was certainly an anomaly for women and “lady” when ladyhood was still aspired to by young women, Margaret McIlwaine lived a challenging life. Yet as she moved into her 80s and as her health began to decline, she seemed to have few complaints, few demands, and a decreased need for companionship. She did not seem irritably discontent. She simply seemed to have retreated into herself and to have become more reflective and less interactive with others (Degges-White, 2005, p. 36)

When older age becomes a time of social withdrawal and individuals witness the loss of friends and family, hoarding protects the individual’s boundaries and creates



social distance. As hoarders retreat to their homes and resist social contact, the hoarding protects the individual from encroachment.

*A means of communication.* Hoarding allows the individual to express repressed feelings about control, loss, and change. Individuals with hoarding behaviors act out their need to take charge of their lives at a time when financial, health, and social issues are often taken out of their hands. Their accumulation of valueless items may also communicate the extent to which their needs for recognition and attention have been unmet.

Hoarding is an example of extreme self-neglect, which has been defined as an example of indirect life-threatening behavior, an activity of passive participation that endangers life. Indirect life-threatening behavior is often manifested through passive suicide, noncompliance, and personal control, as in the case of an elderly woman who was removed from her home involuntarily and refused food when her requests to be returned to her own apartment were ignored (Thibault, O'Brien, & Turner, 1999). Hoarding, then, can be examined as a manifestation of an individual's need for social control and having few options for exerting control.

*A means of reducing stress and frustration.* While some hoarding theorists have suggested stress as a causal element in hoarding (Clark, et al., 1975; Frost et al., 1995; Vostanis & Dean 1992), there is no empirical research confirming that hoarders have suffered from either real or perceived stress any more significantly than non-hoarders. However, hoarded objects offer a strong sense of comfort, thereby offering a means to reduce stress and frustration in everyday life.

...A man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes, and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down (Henry James, as cited in Belk, 1992, p. 291).

Among elders who hoard, the collected possessions offer continuity with the past while providing solace at a time when they are experiencing personal and social losses. Due to financial, social, and mobility limitations, traditional ways of reducing stress may be denied or inaccessible for elderly individuals.

*A way of resolving inner conflict.* Hoarding allows a soothing of psychic tension by surrounding oneself with objects that are meaningful and valuable to the individual. For elderly individuals, hoarding provides a tangible armor against which they can face death awareness and confront changes in their physical health, their community, their families and friends, and their resources.

Surrounded by our things, we are sheltered from the many forces that would deflect us into new concepts, practices, and experiences...things are our ballast. They stabilize us by reminding us of our past, by making this past a virtual, substantial part of our present (McCracken, 1988, p. 124).

*A form of exploitation for personal gain.* Elderly individuals particularly value their possessions because the possessions offer the individual an ability to control their ownership. Older adults are in the position to either preserve the self by holding onto

possessions or may achieve some “symbolic immortality” by transferring possessions to others. Jane, an 89 year- old woman, widowed for 10 years, says,

I know that when I pass, my things will be safe with my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren...I feel very good because I know where my possessions are going because I already chose that (Price, Arnould & Curasi, 2000, p. 191).

### *Treatment and Intervention*

Eloise Rathbone-McCuan (1996) reported that intervention into self-neglecting cases, many of which involve hoarding, creates dilemmas for practitioners in providing services.

These elders maintain elements of personal dignity, a fierce insistence on their independence, and do not necessarily welcome outside intervention. When assistance is mandated (if the person is a danger to themselves or others) or volunteered, some elders may try to escape from those offering help, directly refuse the assistance, or sabotage efforts to improve their conditions (Rathbone-McCuan, 1996, p. 367).

Practitioners and clients may disagree on ways to reduce risks due to value differences, acceptance of inadequate or unsafe living conditions, and the degree of autonomy appropriate for the situation. Some self-neglecting elders are resistant to help and consume enormous community resources through social welfare agencies, hospitals, and law enforcement, all of which are frustrated by their inability to intervene legally. In addition, the practitioner also faces limited services, complex bureaucracy, long waiting lists, insufficient or unavailable informal support for the elder,

Longres (1994) reported that self-neglect poses problems for practitioners because they must deal with balancing autonomy, independence, self-determination against the need to build community and show concern for the welfare of others. “Allegations of self-neglect, however well-intentioned, imply a disapproval of the way elderly lead their lives while substantiation of self-neglect requires that elderly admit they have been unable to care for themselves” (Longres, 1994, p. 5). Valentine and Cash recommend that any intervention in a self-neglect case should be non-coercive, therapeutic, not controlling or punitive. “Maintaining a balance between the elders’ individual right to self-determination, self-direction, and autonomy vs. protection of an adult who is legally incompetent to care for the needs of him or her is required” (Valentine, & Cash, 1986, p. 24).

Sengstock and Barrett (1986) contend that intervention should be based on the type of community affected, either emotionally close communities (eg. families, religious groups), geographic communities (shared living arrangements), or service communities (medical or social services; workplaces). These communities vary by the amount of social interaction, the extent to which the community members share with each other, and the degree of identity and closeness in which members feel. The emotionally close community most strongly feels the impact of self-neglecting elders. Sengstock and Barrett contend that the rights of individuals should be abrogated when the rights of others have been affected, such as when hoarding leads to fire hazards.

*Belief Systems*

The first found empirical study that explores cognitive-behavioral factors of hoarding individuals utilized a random sample of community volunteers and students (Frost et al., 1995). Hoarders were identified through the Hoarding Scale, a 22-item questionnaire measuring hoarding behavior, and hoarders and non-hoarders were compared in terms of their scores on the modified Rotter's Locus of Control Scale, an 18-item Attachment to Possessions questionnaire, the 19-item Environmental Consciousness questionnaire, and two Responsibility for Harm questionnaires. Results indicated that hoarders use possessions less frequently than the norm ( $p < .01$ ), yet have a significantly greater desire to have control over possessions ( $p < .01$ ). There was no correlation between internal locus of control and hoarding scale, but high correlation between external locus of control and hoarding ( $p < .01$ ), indicating that hoarders feel things external to them control events in their lives. Hoarders are more significantly and positively attached to objects ( $p < .01$ ), and hoarders' possessions have more sentimental value and comfort.

Furthermore, high scores on the hoarding scale were associated with higher levels of perceived responsibility for being prepared and the well-being of the possession. Hoarding was also associated with greater emotional attachment to possessions and to the reliance on possessions for emotional comfort. "...A woman with a hoarding compulsion expressed the sentiment of wanting to 'just go home and gather all my treasures (things) around me' after a particularly stressful day" (Frost et al., 1995, p. 898).

The process of buying or acquiring objects provides some comfort to hoarders, but hoarders feel the most content by simply being in proximity to their possessions. Because their possessions provide comfort and safety, hoarders feel intensely violated when their objects are discarded. Hoarders talked in terms of loss when their possessions were removed, such as the losses of important attachments, information, and opportunities (Frost & Hartl, 1996). By refusing to discard unused, nonfunctional items, hoarders maintain the comfort provided by possessions and they avoid the unpleasant chore of weighing the variables associated with making a wrong decision or throwing out a needed possession.

Hoarding is guided by beliefs about the necessity of maintaining control over possessions, beliefs about responsibility for possessions and beliefs about the necessity of perfection. Randy Frost and his colleagues suggest that three types of information-processing deficits are associated with hoarding: deficits in decision-making, deficits in categorization/organization, and deficits with memory (Frost & Hartl, 1996).

#### *Deficits in Decision-Making*

Because hoarders have a tremendous fear of making mistakes, they are typically very indecisive and have great difficulty discarding objects. Similar to non-hoarders, hoarders save objects because they perceive a future use or the object has sentimental value, but they save in much more quantity than non-hoarders. Non-hoarders will also worry much less intensely about throwing away an object that has some usefulness because they realize they can replace the item in the future if necessary. In the case of

animal hoarding, hoarders have difficulty limiting the number of animals and feel a deep sense of responsibility to care for strays.

“Everybody thinks I’m crazy,” said Ruth Knueven, [an 82 year old woman who had amassed 488 cats, 222 of which were dead] who is staying in a motel with her husband. But she said she didn’t set out to amass hundreds of cats--it was just something that happened. She said she took in strays, one after another after another, because she wanted to protect them, and eventually they overwhelmed her. As cats died, she said, she stored them in plastic containers, intending to dispose of them. But she never got around to it (Duggan & Smith, 2005).

The Steketee, Frost, and Kyrios (2003) study provides empirical evidence that supports the finding that hoarders have problems making decisions.

#### *Deficits in Categorization/Organization*

In a sorting exercise, hoarders were found to have great difficulty in categorizing objects because each item was seemingly totally unique and thereby necessitated its own category. Some of the cognitive restructuring treatment developed by Frost required hoarders to sort objects into “Discard,” “Store,” and “Recycle” categories, a task of enormous challenge for hoarders.

Frost and Hartl (1996) often observed hoarders showing “churning” behaviors in which hoarders had great difficulty placing an object in a pile of objects with similar value. Hoarders have problems differentiating objects by value because all of their possessions were considered very valuable. “On numerous occasions in our work with

hoarders, items that had not been seen in years were immediately given a high value” (Frost & Hartl, 1996, p. 346).

### *Difficulties with Memory*

Hoarders suffer a lack of confidence with memory and overestimate the importance of remembering and recording information. Their difficulties remembering is manifested by hoarders’ trouble with storing objects out of sight. “One obstacle to organization among hoarders is the belief that if the possession isn’t in sight, it will not be remembered” (Frost & Hartl, 1996, p. 347). The strong importance of remembering and recording information is demonstrated in hoarders stockpiling newspapers, magazines, receipts, bills, and other paper. “Keeping newspapers was a way of retaining information without having to remember it” (Frost & Hartl, 1996, p. 346). In fact, paper is the most common object collected by hoarders (Frost & Gross, 1993; Frost & Hartl, 1996; Greenberg, 1987; Frost et al., 1998; Stein, 1993).

### *Instinct*

Hoarding may represent a basic instinctive attachment need based on the following findings: (a) animals acquire and attach to nonfunctional, inanimate objects; (b) both hoarders and non-hoarders are driven to accumulate and keep large quantities of non-functional objects; and (c) possessiveness is evidenced across cultures. The contention being suggested here is that hoarding represents an excessive behavior based on a rudimentary instinct.



*Animals and Acquisition*

By observing infants and animals in their interactions with inanimate objects, Bowlby (1982) concludes that possession attachment is instinctive. He presents voluminous findings of ducks, geese, guinea pigs, dogs, sheep, and monkeys forming attachments to objects that were not necessary to the animals' survival and the use of the objects did not result in receiving food or warmth. The objects, which did not include food, became either short-term or permanent possessions for the animals. Similar to Freud, Bowlby considers the source of attachment behavior to be libidinal and examined animal possession attachment within a psychoanalytic framework.

*Accumulating and Keeping Non-Functional Objects*

Other than animals, hoarded objects are universally and by definition of limited usefulness and functionality, are rarely used, offer little purpose in meeting survival or caretaking needs, and yet are hardly ever discarded. Hoarded objects typically include newspapers, magazines, bags, trash, and other paper products (Frost & Gross, 1993; Frost et al., 2000; Steketee et al., 2001). However, collecting objects of limited utility which are not needed for basic needs is common among hoarders and non-hoarders alike.

“In our own consumer society, hundreds of objects can be found in each household that are not necessarily productive in a purely material sense” (Csikszentmihayli & Rochberg-Holton, 1981, p. 49). In a seminal study of 82 families in the Chicago area, the subjects mentioned a total of 1,694 objects that the owners considered special or of high value. Of the most-frequently cited objects, only two (furniture and plates) could be considered functional or valued due to usefulness while

eight (visual art, photographs, books, stereo, musical instrument, television, sculpture, and plants) are more aesthetically appealing. Of the 315 individual subjects, about one-half were in the middle socioeconomic strata, with equal representation in low income and high income classes. Over half (56%) were female and 27% were elderly. The elderly subjects were less likely to rate functional possessions as valuable and they considered experiences, associations, the self, memories, intrinsic qualities, and family as creating meaningfulness of objects.

Possession meaningfulness is relevant to hoarding because hoarding is functional and adaptive among individuals. Hoarders and non-hoarders acquire and keep the same objects, but non-hoarders keep fewer objects and have less difficulty discarding.

#### *Possessiveness Across Cultures*

The most basic information about ourselves as human beings—the fact that we are human—has been traditionally conveyed to us by the use of artifacts.

Civilized people express their identity as humans by wearing clothes, cooking their food and eating with utensils, living houses and sleeping in beds (Csikszentmihayli & Rochberg-Holton, 1981, p. 92).

In addition to hoarding cases being reported in the United States, hoarding has been identified in Europe (Clark, 1975; Cornwall, 1981), Asia (Chow, 2001; Humphrey, 2002), the Middle East (Greenberg et al., 1990; Strubbe, 2000), Australia, Africa, and South America (Stein, 1993). Similarly, several studies about possessions and materialism convey that ownership represents a vital aspect of expressing one's identity and cultural membership. The

studies described in this section highlight that while there are idiosyncratic cultural meanings of possessions, the acquisition and ownership of possessions is a universal need.

Margaret Mead's study of the Manus demonstrates a strong sense of encultured possessiveness. Children are taught from infancy "this is mine" behavior, with severe physical punishment for breaking objects, even those already broken or non-functional. "But in Manus where property is sacred and one wails for lost property as for the dead, respect for property is taught children from their earliest years" (Mead, 1930, p. 32-33).

The only culture found with no value of possessiveness is the Tasady tribe in the Philippines in which none of the members own possessions. The study of the Tasady tribe in terms of possession and ownership is particularly enlightening because this group of 25 individuals in the dense jungle on the island of Mindanao had no outside contact with the outside world for a least 700 years, allowing anthropological study free from any other influences.

The jungle they live in is so rich that food gathering is a relatively simple task that requires few implements. The several stone tools that they do use are generally made right at the time they are needed, and then abandoned (Furby, 1978, p. 309). Their detachment from their possessions is similar to ownership behavior among pre-historical individuals. These findings suggest that possessiveness is both an internal drive as well as a cultural norm.

*Materialism.* One of the most riveting reports about possessions in other countries is a photographic documentary (Menzel, 1994) in which average citizens in 30 countries were interviewed and their belongings photographed in front of their homes.

The 30 families were chosen from United Nations countries that represent the average family in the area in terms of income and family size, as well as typical in terms of location (urban, rural, suburban, small town, village), dwelling, occupation and religion.

The report showed living spaces that ranged from 33 to 500 square feet per household family member, with an average of 186 square feet per member. The families in the three most wealthy countries (Japan, United States, and Iceland) owned multiple telephones, television sets, radios, and cars, but their favorite possessions and most-wanted possessions did not include any of these objects. Instead, the wealthiest families most valued sentimental objects (eg., an inherited ring) and religious items (eg., a *Bible*), similar to the families in the poorest countries of India, Mali, Vietnam, Bhutan, and Ethiopia in which religious and sentimental items were the most cherished possessions.

In a more empirical study, Belk (1992) administered the Materialism scale to a convenient sample of 135 students representing 12 different countries in order to gauge the level of possession attachment and materialism. The overall materialism scale could range from 21 (not materialistic) to 105 (very materialistic.) In this study, the total mean score was 59. Students from Romania scored the highest in materialism (M=63), followed by the United States (M=61), while students from Sweden were least materialistic (M=53). Students from Middle Eastern and Asian countries (Israel, Turkey, Thailand, India) scored near the mean (M=58-59).

*Spirituality.* Leaders in the three largest religions (Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism) are similar in their teachings that materialism jeopardizes spiritual fulfillment, though practitioners often disregard these messages.

Despite a history of teachings on the spiritual corruption associated with excessive attachment to wealth or material accumulation and the issuing of occasional statements on the topic, religious leaders and institutions in industrial nations have largely failed to address the consumerist engine that drives industrial economies (Gardner, 2003, p. 17).

Possessiveness and materialism among Buddhist countries is particularly relevant to hoarding because of the Buddhist practice of emotionally detaching from possessions. "...Something that is a product of ignorance and attachment is bound to cause suffering; that is its nature" (His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 1999, p. 105). Strong emotional attachment to possessions among Buddhists, then, could indicate that an innate need was stronger and more influential than a religious and spiritual tenet. Buddhist practices of detachment, too, may have some applicability in treating hoarders to detach from possessions.

In Chow's (2001) analysis of the Chinese writer Lao She's short story "Attachment," she suggests that people collect objects as a distraction or their collecting "is equivalent to hoarding" (p. 288). She presents Lao She's fictional character Zhuang Yiya, a school administrator, who zealously and ritualistically collects fairly worthless items.

One day, Yang comes to inform Zhuang that the Japanese have arrived in town and would like to appoint him as the head of the education bureau. Zhuang's first reaction is that he can't work for the Japanese. Then Yang explains the conditions: should Zhuang agree, he would save his collection and the Japanese

would shower him with gifts. Should he refuse, however, his things would be confiscated and he would be punished, perhaps even killed. With tears in his eyes, Zhuang looks at the two chests of his collection and nods his head. The story ends at this point with the statement, 'To be attached to something is to die with it.' (Chow, 2001, p. 292).

The story illustrates several universal traits about hoarding, including the fanaticism in which hoarders accumulate and maintain objects, the fierce emotional connection to possessions, and the bond between objects and self-identity that is so strong that discarding represents death to the hoarder.

Between the 1920s and the 1950s, the Buddhist devalue of personal possessions in Mongolia paralleled the socialist regime that practically forbade ownership of personal property (Humphrey, 2002). In current times, Mongolians live in a market state, balancing capitalism with the Buddhist teachings of simplicity and detachment from objects. The tension between spirituality and materialism is exemplified in Mongolian funeral rites.

To die in the right way means separating oneself from this life in order that one may be reborn, and for this one should prepare by distancing oneself from material objects. In fact, even though in old age a Mongol man or woman is expected to have few goods left, their property already having been passed to the younger generation, this separation from the last remaining possessions is felt to be a hard one (Humphrey, 2002, p. 66).

*Attachment to Possessions*

The finding that individuals across the world have strong emotional attachment to their possessions illustrates that amassing items of little economic or functional value is a universal need. Individuals attach to possessions so powerfully that they describe their attachment as evoking the strongest emotions, happiness and love (Ahuvia, 2005). Hoarders and non-hoarders alike are emotionally invested in their possessions despite the amount of time spent with the possessions. “People can be very involved with things they detest and can love things that they are not currently involved with, as in the case of the informants who loved books they hadn’t read in years” (Ahuvia, 2005, p. 172). The emotional attachment can be evidenced in three consumer processes relevant to hoarding—acquisition, possession, and discarding.

*Acquisition*

“Compulsive buying is a disabling condition associated with a chronic failure to control the urge to purchase objects. Compulsive buying is closely related to major depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and in particular, compulsive hoarding” (Kyrios, Frost & Steketee, 2004, p. 241). While compulsive behavior is categorized as a personality or anxiety disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (APA, 1994), others consider compulsive behavior an aspect of addictive behaviors that include substance abuse and eating disorders (Faber & O’Guinn, 1992). In contrast, Frost and his associates theorize that compulsive hoarding and compulsive buying are constructs of compulsive acquisition (Frost et al., 1998; Frost et al., 2000; Kyrios, Frost & Steketee, 2004).

In earlier studies, hoarding collections of possessions was attributable to sentimental and instrumental (usefulness) motivations (Csikszentmihayli & Rochberg-Holton, 1981; Frost & Gross, 1993; Furby, 1978; Kamptner, 1995), while the 1998 study by Frost and associates examined the relationship between hoarding and compulsive buying. Results found a positive correlation between the Compulsive Buying scale and the Hoarding scale ( $r=0.48$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). There was some evidence that the acquisition of free things (free newspapers, handouts, flyers) was associated with compulsive hoarding. (Frost et al., 1998).

Because of the co-occurrence of hoarding and compulsive buying, Kyrios suggests that hoarding and compulsive buying share similar cognitive features, particularly information processing deficits, problems with emotional attachment, erroneous beliefs about the nature of possessions, behavioral avoidance, and decision-making difficulties (Kyrios et al., 2004). In a study of 75 compulsive buyers and 85 controls who were administered a 43-item self-report Buying Cognitions Inventory, Kyrios found three belief systems strongly related to compulsive buyers: (a) compulsive buying was associated with the belief that the acquisition of objects would compensate, reward, or neutralize negative feelings; (b) purchased objects represent security and emotional attachment; and (c) control over acquiring objects is a central need. Other studies found similar emotional attachment to objects and needs to control possessions among hoarders (Frost & Gross, 1993; Frost & Hartl, 1996; Steketee et al., 2003).

In order to determine the critical elements that define compulsive buyers and to estimate the prevalence of compulsive buying in the population, Faber and O'Guinn



(1992) developed a scale that found significant differences between compulsive buyers and general consumers in 13 of the 14 variables studied. The researchers found that compulsive buyers, in contrast to non-compulsive buyers, have lower self-esteem, greater levels of obsessive-compulsiveness, greater happiness and remorse from buying, less object attachment, and higher debt. Faber and O'Guinn theorize that compulsive buying is motivated more by attaining interpersonal and self-esteem goals than by a need to possess objects. In contrast to the work by Frost et al., Faber and O'Guinn concluded that of the nearly 2% of the population who are compulsive buyers, the buying is derived from negative life events and feelings rather than cognitive deficits. Similarly, Belk contends "for compulsive shoppers it appears that the thrill is in acquiring rather than possessing things" (Belk, 1992, p. 49).

### *Possessiveness*

In addition to the need for acquiring possessions, hoarders are compelled to save objects. In one study comparing hoarders and non-hoarders, "...compulsive hoarders think more about reasons to save things, but do not think less about reasons to discard them" (Frost et al., 1998, p. 662). The research team suggested hoarding treatment to focus on cognitive restructuring that reduces hoarders' reasons to save rather than offering reasons for discarding possessions.

In a study of 101 female undergraduates at a small women's college, participants were given the Hoarding Scale, a 22-item questionnaire measuring hoarding behavior; the modified Rotter's Locus of Control Scale; an 18-item Attachment to Possessions questionnaire; the 19-item Environmental Consciousness questionnaire; and two

Responsibility for Harm questionnaires. Results indicated that hoarders use possessions less frequently than the norm ( $p < .01$ ), yet have a significantly greater desire to have control over possessions ( $p < .01$ ). There was no correlation between internal locus of control and the hoarding scale, but there was a high correlation between external locus of control and hoarding ( $p < .01$ ). In other words, hoarders feel that external situations and people control events in their lives. In comparison to non-hoarders, hoarders are more significantly and positively attached to their possessions ( $p < .01$ ) and derive more sentimental value and comfort from objects (Frost et al., 1995).

Hoarding possessions may allow individuals a sense of control when they are feeling that other factors are controlling their lives. This sense of control is manifested by the owner making choices in the object's fate, whether saved, stored, destroyed, transferred, bequeathed, traded, or discarded. The sense of entitlement and control over possessions is so strongly innate among people that even items not legitimately owned instill strong needs to control, such as employees setting claim to computers, parking spaces, and storage areas. The ability to control ownership, including the opportunity to acquire as well as the ability to determine relinquishment, shapes an individual and her identity (Csikszentmihayli & Rochberg-Holton, 1981).

If I am the one who uses an object, I certainly exercise considerable control over it; if I have the *right* to control use, I exercise even more control, not only over the object but also over other individuals" (Furby, 1978, p. 312).

The individual's ability to produce effects in the environment, to experience "causal efficacy and control," is a central meaning in possessing objects because "it is pleasurable

and rewarding to experience a causal relationship between one's actions and changes in the environment" (Furby, 1978, p. 321).

### *Discarding*

The issue of discarding seemingly non-valuable objects is illustrated by two coexisting and tension-fraught phenomenon represented in the literature—the hoarders' belief that discarding hoarded objects provokes grief-stricken loss and the hoarders' inability to differentiate between items of value and items of worthlessness.

I have observed that one of the main reasons for hoarding is this: a fear that if things are thrown away, they will almost certainly be needed one day, but will be gone for good. This loss will then lead to some kind of serious hardship or deprivation...Because of this, many hoarders seem to lack the ability to discriminate between what is truly useless and what isn't. Ironically, hoarders rarely use, much less look through, the things they save (Penzel, n.d., p. 2).

Among hoarders, the need to avoid discarding is immense.

As one woman said, 'I get a headache or sick to my stomach if I have to give something away'...Discarding things seems to reawaken old memories and feelings of loss or abandonment, akin to grief or the pain of rejection. 'I feel incredibly sad—it's really very painful,' one client said of the process. Another client, a mental-health counselor, said, 'I don't understand why, but when I have to throw something away, even something like dead flowers, I feel my old abandonment fears and I also feel lonely' (Warren, Ostrom & Rosenfeld, 1988, p. 62).

The emotions are so strong that some hoarders will threaten or commit violence against friends or family who attempt to discard objects (Frost et al., 2000).

To gauge the extent to which hoarding is a problem of indecision about future need and the consequences of discarding a possession, Frost and Shows (1993) tested subjects using the newly developed Indecisiveness Scale along with the Social Problem Solving Inventory Decision Making Subscale and the Hoarding Scale. Results indicate high correlation between hoarding and indecisiveness, as well as a high correlation between indecisiveness and perfectionism, suggesting that hoarders' inability to discard objects relates to difficulties making decisions about the worthiness of items and an intense concern about making mistakes.

#### *Meanings of Possessions*

The final factor to be explored as possible etiology to explain hoarding behavior are the inherent and proscribed meanings of possessions. The previous factors explored—psychopathology, self-neglect, belief systems, instinct, attachment to possessions—examined hoarding within a context of the individual and the individual and her possessions. This section examines the individual within a social context in which possessions represent meaning about the hoarding individual and the individual attempts to maintain self-identity through hoarding objects. The section will study private and public meanings of possessions, the maintenance of self-identity, and the special relationship of elderly women and their possessions.

*Private Meanings of Possessions*

In contrast to public meanings or collectively defined meanings of the home, individual possessions have meanings that are strictly personal. Personal possessions “may be closely affiliated with the self, facilitating and expressing being, relationships, self-concepts, growth, and change” (Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992, p. 153).

“...Possessions...provide us with a sense of mastery, a sense of self, and sense of past” (Belk, 1992, p. 52), as well as a sense of “security, belonging, and self-identity” (Cookman, 1996, p. 227).

... Things are cherished not because of the material comfort they provide but for the information they convey about the owner and his or her ties to others... A battered toy, an old musical instrument, a homemade quilt provide meaning that is more central to the values of people than any number of expensive appliances or precious metals (Csikszentmihayli & Rochberg-Holton, 1981, p. 239).

No literature was found on the meanings of hoarders' possessions, but the strong emotional attachment to objects suggests that hoarders' collections are meaningful to them. In cases where the hoarder is stockpiling newspapers with the intent to cut out recipes, the meaningfulness of the possession is clearer than when the hoarder saves unlikely items like cigarette ashes and pet fur.

The personal meanings of possessions may be so strong that people cannot differentiate between the object and the self. “Our material possessions may represent for us parts of our own body...in that we feel unhappy and miserable after losing one of our possessions” (Freud, 1968). For example, Mr. G, having separated from his wife, lived

with his mother and hoarded wood, nuts, bolts, nails, and rusty electrical wire. He became violent when someone tried to remove any object, saying, “It’s like taking part of my body” (Greenberg et al., 1990, p. 419).

The research by Price, Arnould and Curasi (2000), supported by other consumer research, found that possessions offer the following meanings to elderly individuals: a representation of the individual’s life, a legacy of the self, provision of stability, a linkage to other times and places, and totemic meanings. Additionally, “possessions people have been able to hold on to, through good times and bad, increase in meanings and value,” (p. 184), suggesting that hoarded objects are valued because they symbolize survival through an extended time period of events. The meanings of life narrative, a legacy of the self, and stability are themes of meanings discussed more thoroughly in the section about self-identity that follows.

The way in which possessions provide a linkage to other times and places is illustrated in the case of Bernie, a 68-year-old man who collects turtles.

He uses these turtles to transport him metaphorically in time noting, “Each turtle is related to a trip, to a different experience.” Like many cherished possessions, Bernie’s turtles provide contextual anchors to specific times, places, and social situations (Price et al., 2000, p. 197.)

Totemic meanings suggest magical, ethereal, and spiritual meanings to possessions, such as plants growing after a significant death, thereby symbolizing metaphorical immortality of a lost family member.

*Public Meanings of Possessions*

In contrast to economics literature that assigns value to objects based on their ability to be exchanged, Belk (1992), Csikszentmihayli and Rochberg-Holton (1981), and Richins (1994) contend that the value of a possession is based on its meaningfulness, with Richins differentiating between private and public meanings. Private meanings are those meanings ascribed to a possession by its owner and public meanings are ascribed by society at large. Both public and private meaningfulness of possessions has ramifications for hoarders who collect objects deemed by society to be of little or no value.

“The meanings of cultural symbols are shaped and reinforced in social interchanges, and individuals with similar enculturation experiences tend to have considerable similarity in the meanings they attach to these symbols” (Richins, 1994, p. 508). Within this information age in which written and broadcasted news and information are updated constantly, consumers are daily confronted with millions of items with informative value. The task of absorbing, processing, analyzing, and filtering socially valuable information is problematic among hoarding individuals who have trouble assessing what information materials to maintain because of their future utility and what can be discarded. The research by Frost and his associates underscores this tension between hoarders and the public meaningfulness of information by his findings that the most commonly hoarded items are newspapers, magazines, brochures, and other information-sharing paper products (Frost & Gross, 1993; Frost & Hartl, 1996; Frost et al., 1998; Frost et al., 2000; Steketee et al., 2001), as well as his finding that hoarders

have significantly more problems making decisions than non-hoarders (Frost & Hartl, 1996; Frost, Hartl, Christian, & Williams, 1995; Frost & Shows, 1993; Frost et al., 2003; Hartl & Frost, 1999; Kyrios et al., 2004; Steketee & Frost, 2003; Steketee et al., 2001).

Objects represent culturally-ascribed meanings and symbolize abstract beliefs and emotions, such as enjoyment, attachment, and priorities. “In almost every culture, objects are chosen to represent the power of the bearer” (Csikszentmihayli & Rochberg-Holton, 1981, p. 26). Men’s weapons and sporting goods, for example, symbolize the culturally gender-stereotypic values of strength, bravery, and endurance, while home decorative objects represent the values of female nurturance and fertility. In the Nuer culture, “the spear exaggerates and demonstrates to everyone those personal traits that the owner—and the rest of the culture—aspire to: strength, speed, potency, permanence; the ability to command respect, to control one’s surroundings” (Csikszentmihayli & Rochberg-Holton, 1981, p. 26).

A man’s fighting spear (*mut*) is constantly in his hand, forming almost part of him...and he is never tired of sharpening or polishing it, for a Nuer is very proud of his spear...In a sense it is animate, for it is an extension and external symbol...which stands for the strength, vitality, and virtue of the person. It is a projection of the self (Pritchard, 1956, p. 233, as quoted by Csikszentmihayli & Rochberg-Holton, 1981, p. 26).

Possessions can “maintain social order by supporting hierarchical differentiation among people” (Csikszentmihayli & Rochberg-Holton, 1981, p. 17) through symbolic assignment of status. These status symbols markedly divide those with power and wealth



and those people marginalized by society. Hoarders, whose earnings cross socioeconomic levels (Arluke et al., 2002; Clark et al., 1975), collect the most socially worthless items—used bicycle parts, outdated receipts, old *TV Guide* magazines—thereby allowing society to assign hoarders to the most bottom rung of the social ladder. In contrast, people who collect items of social value—antique cars, prehistoric art, jewelry—are assigned the highest social status, even when those possessions constrict movement or functionality to the same degree hoarded objects restrict movement. For example, traffic patterns in the home that are interrupted by life-sized statues and large plants are not considered as socially repugnant and hazardous as traffic patterns interrupted by stacks of newspaper and piles of clothing.

#### *Maintenance of Self-Identity*

The seminal work of Belk (1988), supported by past and current consumer research (Ahuvia, 2005; Csikszentmihayli & Rochberg-Holton, 1981; Gentry, Baker & Kraft, 1995; Kleine, Kleine & Allen, 1995; Price et al., 2000) contends that people extend, expand, and strengthen their self-identity through their possessions. “That we are what we have...is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior” (Belk, 1988, p. 139). Belk’s related findings that identity issues are pivotal to consumption and that possessions reflect self-identity were supported in the work of Price, Arnould, and Curasi (2000). In this study involving 70 telephone interviews, 10 in-depth interviews and two case studies of consumers, self-identity was the element most expressed in ownership of possessions.

Issues related to the construction and maintenance of a sense of self permeated the responses. Love objects serve as indexical mementos of key events or relationships in the life narrative, help resolve identity conflicts, and tend to be tightly embedded in a rich symbolic network of associations (Price et al., 2000, p. 185).

The study found that possessions “create a personal and durable sense of identity (p.196) by reminding the owner of social relationships, the life history of the owner, other times and places, and past and present interests, experiences, skills, and successes. Possessions maintained through good times and bad increase in their meaningfulness and value. Possessions also express the self, as in personal preferences in fashion and home furnishings, and allows creative expression.

In the case of hoarders, whose emotional attachment to possessions is unknown and who are socially isolated and withdrawn, the objects may reflect a self-identity in which control is a central value. Discarding of hoarded objects is akin to discarding of one’s self. “When disposition is involuntary, informants’ sense of loss of self and sadness are palpable. Further, involuntary disposition curtails the creative possibilities for disposition decisions” (Richins, 1994, p. 203).

An important aspect of self-identity is the ability to maintain continuity of self-identity throughout life. In a qualitative study of 30 people reported to adult protective services for self-neglect, Bozinovski (2000) determined that self-neglect represents the socio-psychological process of “maintaining continuity.” Atchley’s (2000) Continuity Theory suggests that elders may use maladaptive behaviors in their attempt to hold on to

long-time environments, relationships, and activities. Self-neglecting and hoarding behaviors, then, demonstrate two key aspects of maintaining continuity—the preservation/protection of self and the maintenance of customary control. Elderly self-neglecters engaged in various “identity construction activities” (Bozinovski, 2000, p. 43) and activities designed to maintain customary control, such as hoarding sugar packets in nursing homes, in order to assert control and maintain continuity of self-identity.

“...Men and women make order in their selves (i.e., ‘retrieve their identity’) by first creating and then interacting with the material world... Thus the things that surround us are inseparable from whom we are” (Csikszentmihayli & Rochberg-Holton, 1981, p. 16). The more recent content analyses by Kleine et al. (1995) found that “possessions are not literally the self, but artifacts of the self” because the significance of possessions in self-identity is through their “link to a meaningful life narrative episode” (p. 354). In other words, possessions offer the owner the ability to narrate and reflect on her life story; they illustrate the self as a unique individual; they demonstrate ways in which the individual is connected to others; and they mark who I am, who I am not, and who I am no longer.

In contrast to Belk’s contention that consumerism and ownership represent the drive to develop a coherent sense of self, Cushman (1990) theorizes an “empty self” identity in which people relentlessly feed objects into a vast emptiness that can never be filled. The emptiness is fueled by a tension between a person’s desire for a “coherent identity narrative” and socially-driven consumerism mentality. “Thus people are provoked to engage in serial (and potentially endless) rounds of lifestyle consumption—

attempting to identify and master the lifestyle and accoutrements that will bring fulfillment” (Ahuvia, 2005, p. 175) that can be illustrated by persistent, escalating, compulsive hoarding (Cushman, 1990).

*Elderly Women and Their Possessions.*

Having lived as second-class citizens in a patriarchal society, women enter old age with prejudicial social attitudes against older age, women, low income, and a divorced or never-married status. Elderly women are viewed socially as “close to death and thus redundant” (Aitken & Griffin, 1996, p. 77) because they are typically no longer fulfilling roles as wife and mother, enduring physical problems, are not earning money at a job, and are considered physically weak. Hoarders, typically elderly women who live alone, are already marginalized by a sexist, ageist society that devalues women, the elderly, and those who are single or divorced. It is unclear whether hoarding represents the individual’s need to assert control over her life instead of yielding to oppression and disenfranchisement or if hoarding represents acceptance of an untouchable social status.

“As people age, they spend increasing amounts of time at home, reflecting health decrements, decreasing spatial abilities, and decreased opportunities and roles as well as an increasing sense of attachment and of ‘placefulness’” (Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992, p. 151). In the process of aging, people confine their home to smaller spaces to accommodate spatial abilities. For example, daily living may be constricted to two or three rooms within a large house. Rubinstein and Parmelee (1992) term this phenomenon “environmental centralization,” a process similar to the restricting of functional space by hoarding. Hoarders typically stack so many piles of papers and other useless objects that

entire rooms are unusable. The confining of their homes, then, obligates the elderly hoarding woman to navigate smaller spaces and rooms.

“The home affords independence in all its modes, by providing a physical boundary between the individual and others, and by defining a space that is uniquely the domain of the individual” (Sixsmith, 1990, p. 180). In the 1990 study of 60 elderly people, Sixsmith discovered that the home became increasingly more important as people age because it represents a sense of “refuge.” That elderly people state that they need and seek refuge suggests a certain lack of social integration that may also be reflected by hoarders’ need to accumulate large quantities of objects. A hoarder’s home, then, can be seen as a fortress to provide protection from the callousness of the outside world, and in fact, several photographs of the interiors of hoarders’ homes show fort-like structures built by hoarders out of stacks of newspapers.

While some theorists suggest that older people gradually detach emotionally from their possessions and give away cherished possessions (Price et al., 2000), others suggest that possessions become more meaningful in later life to “give an older person a sense of control over the environment, serve as ‘transitional objects’ to give people a sense of comfort in strange places, and serve as ‘anchor points’ to facilitate exploration of a new environment” (Cookman, 1996, p. 231). The meaning of possessions in creating, maintaining, and preserving identity changes over the life course. When the elderly are faced with losses of work, friends, and family, their sense of self-identity may change and possessions then take on new significance and importance. Identity becomes a foremost issue immediately prior to death, and the disposition of possessions may significantly aid

in the process of preserving identity (Gentry et al., 1995). "...The accumulation of artifacts is a strategy by which the dying preserve identities over time and communicate their importance to survivors...'. For the elderly, these objects represent the last symbolic remnants of who and what they once were" (Unruh, 1983, p. 343). The issue is particularly poignant in hoarding intervention when the maintaining of hoarded objects, as well as making decisions about how and what to discard, may allow an elderly hoarder the ability to preserve identity at a critical period of time.

Possessions not only preserve self-identity among the elderly, they offer comfort due to their familiarity and they allow for a sense of immortality of the owner. "Not only is immortality possible through the transference of possessions, but possessions may also help make sense of the past, and allow the elderly to figure out where they are now by putting them at ease with the present" (Gentry et al., 1995, p. 416). Immortality may be achieved by hoarding when hoarders believe they forestall death by delaying making decisions about disposing of their possessions.

### Conclusion

The literature review examined empirical research, case studies, and news articles about hoarding to find that hoarding is pervasive and neither well-studied nor well-understood. Though there is not enough evidence to suggest a conclusive deduction, hoarding is typically perceived as a symptom of mental illness or cognitive dysfunction. Hoarding as a sociological phenomenon needs additional research in order to integrate research about the meanings of possessions and to study hoarding within a broader and more universal perspective.

## METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

While hoarding has been addressed in the literature as indicative of a mental illness or cognitive dysfunction, there are no found studies that examine the issue of hoarding as being functional for either society or the individual. This research study explores the concept of hoarding from the perspective of APS workers, as they have the opportunity to observe hoarding behavior, interact and relate to hoarders, and are also members of society as well. The study explores the extent to which hoarding is functional in that hoarding provides an opportunity to emotionally attach to possessions, as well as exploring the extent to which hoarding is due to idiosyncratic characteristics of hoarders; i.e., mental illness or cognitive disorders.

### Mixed Methods Approach

A mixed methods approach was chosen to permit a comparison of statistical analyses of survey results with qualitative telephone interview results. “Qualitative data, with their emphasis on people’s ‘lived experience,’ are fundamentally well suited for locating the *meanings* people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives...and for connecting these meanings to the *social world* around them” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). In this research study, adult protective services workers throughout Virginia completed a survey on hoarding, which was augmented by interviews with five adult protective services workers.

### Conceptualization

The overall, global theoretical question is:

Why do some elderly women hoard seemingly useless objects?

The assumption undergirding this research study is that individuals behave in certain ways because it is functional, a concept supported by theoretical and empirical literature presented in the literature review. The second assumption is that APS workers, because of their unique experiences that allow them to observe hoarding within the home and because they often develop working relationships with hoarding elderly women, can offer a perspective on hoarding that will provide a greater understanding and insight into hoarding behavior. Related to the overall theoretical question, then, are the research questions:

To what extent do adult protective services workers perceive hoarding among elderly women as being functional?

To what extent do adult protective services workers perceive hoarding among elderly women as being idiosyncratic (i.e., a symptom of mental illness, cognitive disorders, or physical impairment)?

For the purpose of this research, emotional attachment to possessions is viewed as a functional, purposeful reason for hoarding. Functionality is studied as involving three key elements that comprise emotional attachment and hoarding—acquisition of objects, possessiveness, and reluctance to discard objects.



### Functionalism as Theoretical Basis

Functionalism is explored within this study by examining the extent to which hoarding is functional to society and the extent to which hoarding is functional to the individual. The study sample is adult protective services workers in order to explore the social and individual factors that may contribute to hoarding.

The degree of functionality or purposefulness of hoarding is explored among the three elements of emotional attachment and hoarding. Acquisition is considered functional to the individual when it serves a need or satisfies a compelling drive. Possessiveness is considered functional to the individual when hoarding reduces stress, provides comfort or security, allows for emotional attachment, or creates a sense of identity. Possessiveness is also considered functional when hoarding is due to beliefs about the nature of possessions; i.e., that the possessions are useful, functional, valuable, or irreplaceable. A reluctance to discard objects is considered functional to the individual because the objects represent totemic symbols of the self and the hoarder's thought of disposing of possessions equates to the disposing of oneself. These functional concepts provided the basis for the qualitative and quantitative surveys and their analyses.

### Purpose of the Study

The major purpose of this study is to identify the degree to which adult protective services workers perceive that hoarding is functional in that elderly women are emotionally attached to their possessions. After conducting the literature review, the research questions that have been unanswered include:

- To what extent do elderly women who hoard continue to add to their collection of possessions?
- To what extent do elderly women who hoard show a need to save their collection of possessions?
- To what extent do elderly women who hoard refuse to dispose of their collection of possessions?
- Are elderly women who hoard emotionally attached to their collection of possessions?
- Are elderly women who hoard more emotionally attached to possessions than non-hoarding elderly women?

#### Hypotheses

H1. There is a relationship between hoarding and acquisition, a relentless drive to collect more objects.

H2. There is a relationship between hoarding and possessiveness, a strong need to save objects.

H3. There is a relationship between hoarding and reluctance to discard, a disinclination to throw out unusable objects

H4: Acquisition, possessiveness, and reluctance to discard are three components that comprise emotional attachment.

#### Methodology

### *Design*

The study is a cross-sectional study to explore, explain, and describe hoarding behavior among elderly women from adult protective service workers' viewpoints. The mixed methods approach includes a quantitative study based on a mailed survey to APS workers and a qualitative study based on telephone interviews with five APS workers. The research utilizes quantitative and qualitative instruments and analyses. The mixed-methods approach has the advantage of allowing a deeper understanding of the issue of hoarding while permitting some generalizability.

### *Sample*

The sampling frame includes all professionals whose job functions involve encountering hoarded items and hoarders, including building inspectors, law enforcement, health department workers, and adult protective services workers. The sample is the entire population of adult protective services workers in Virginia, a total of 315 people. The qualitative study is based on a sample of five volunteers randomly selected from the population of adult protective services workers.

The unit of analysis is adult protective service (APS) workers throughout the state of Virginia. The workers completed a survey for the quantitative analyses and a portion of the workers were interviewed for the qualitative analyses. The reasons for not selecting hoarders as subjects include: (a) hoarders typically cannot self-identify themselves as having a problem with hoarding, so their ability to converse about their hoarding habits is limited; (b) hoarders require more extensive human subject research protections; (c) hoarders would have to be identified through an availability sample, thus

limiting the representativeness of the sample; and (d) hoarders' reluctance to discuss their hoarding will severely limit the sample size. The reasons for selecting adult protective services workers to the exclusion of other professionals who may have provided services to hoarders include: (a) APS workers traditionally have educational backgrounds in social work; (b) unlike any other professional, APS workers are most likely to have observed at least one hoarding case in the last year; (c) because their work requires home visits, APS workers will have witnessed the hoarding firsthand; and (d) APS workers may be able to offer a client-centered perspective that can appreciate the concept that hoarding is functional.

#### *Protection of Human Research Subjects*

The subjects are not part of a vulnerable population, but are professional adult protective services workers employed at local departments of social services, so the research presents no more than minimal risk. Ethical considerations regarding human research subjects that were considered include informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality.

The subject adult protective services workers were provided with an explanation of the potential risks of the study and the steps utilized to protect anonymity. The cover letter of the mail survey (Appendix A) indicated that participation is completely voluntary, that the respondent may skip any questions that create discomfort, and that there are no direct or indirect repercussions for limiting one's participation in the survey project.

Confidentiality was maintained by storing the list of subjects' names on a password-protected document in a secured automated database. The cover letter indicated that the survey is coded so that non-respondents can be tracked. The code could be linked to the worker's name and locality, but the listing of responding and non-responding workers' names was deleted after the second round of mailing surveys. The cover letter also indicated that the identifiers (name and locality) were maintained in a secured database and will not be released or published, and provided contact information if the worker had questions or concerns.

Completing and returning the survey implies consent, so a consent form was not mailed to the sample of 315 workers. The research study requested a waiver of the requirement to obtain informed consent of the survey respondents because (a) the consent form and instructions would be more time-consuming to read and sign than completing the survey, thereby seriously jeopardizing the response rate; (b) consent is typically not required in survey research; (c) the waiver does not adversely affect the rights and welfare of participating subjects because risks are already minimal and confidentiality is assured; and (d) the principal investigator's contact information is provided to subjects in the event they require debriefing.

The five workers who volunteered for the telephone interview completed, signed, and returned consent forms prior to the interview. The consent form was faxed or mailed to and from each participant. To allow sufficient time to decide on participation, the subjects had up to two weeks to return the consent form. An expert panel reviewed the

consent form and cover letter to assess the extent to which adult protective services workers would be able to comprehend the content.

### Operationalized Variables

#### *Nominal Variables*

The operational definitions of nominal variables follow.

Elderly woman: a woman at least 60 years old

Worker: an employee at a local department of social services who has direct contact with clients who are the subject of a report to adult protective services (APS) of abuse or neglect, and who functions to provide an investigation, case management, and/or service provision to APS clients. For the purpose of this study, the research subjects must currently work in APS at least 50% of their time and be full-time employees.

Adult Protective Services: the program administered by local departments of social services for the protection from abuse and neglect of people at least 60 years old and people with disabilities at least 18 years old.

Other nominal variables collected include the position, city of employment, gender, race, education, and educational discipline of workers.

#### *Ordinal Variables*

The operational definition of the ordinal variable follows.

Hoarding: significant clutter, inability to use living space, and impaired functioning due to accumulating objects of little usefulness

#### *Interval-ratio Variables*

The operational definitions of interval-ratio variables follow.

Emotional attachment: the strength to which the hoarder demonstrates the following behaviors--acquisition, possessiveness, and reluctance to discard.

Acquisition behavior: the extent to which the hoarder acquires more possessions, brings more and more objects into the home, spends time acquiring new possessions, demonstrates relentless need or desire for acquisition, and utilizes acquisition to reduce stress or numb pain.

Possessiveness behavior: the extent to which the hoarder saves possessions because the possessions provide a sense of comfort, enjoyment, functionality, sentimentality, identity, usefulness, and purpose. Possessiveness examines how strongly the hoarder feels the objects are irreplaceable and valuable, how they feel a sense of responsibility to the possessions, and how they feel a need to save everything.

Reluctance to discard behavior: the extent to which the hoarder is reluctant to dispose of objects because discarding creates severe stress and a sense of loss and violation. Reluctance to discard is based on difficulties evaluating the value of objects, a belief that the objects may be of use some day, and a fear of making mistakes in discarding an object that may have some current or potential usefulness.

Percentage of time spent doing various work functions (investigations, service provision, case management, supervision, administration, and other functions) was collected to assure the worker provides direct service and works in adult protective services at least 50% of the time.

Other interval-ratio variables collected include workers' ages, years worked in APS, years at local department of social services, cases of self-neglect, cases of hoarding,

and cases of elderly women hoarding. The case data was total cases for the last two years.

## Quantitative Study

### *Data Collection*

The Hoarding Questionnaire, included in Appendix B, was mailed to all adult protective services workers in Virginia, a total of 315 people in 120 local departments of social services. The cover letter (Appendix A) explained the purpose of the study, the human subject research protections, and asked workers to volunteer to be interviewed by telephone. The five volunteers were randomly selected from the 31 workers who volunteered to participate in the telephone interviews. Email messages were sent to volunteers who were not selected.

The survey participants were given a pen in their survey packets as an incentive to complete the survey, and the five interview participants were paid \$20 each. The incentive and payments were used as methods to encourage participation and provide nominal remuneration.

The survey was sent to all adult protective services workers on a given day with instructions to return the survey in the self-addressed stamped envelope within two weeks. A second notice and survey was sent to non-respondents during the third week. The goal was to have at least 100 respondents, a response rate of about 32%.

### *Data Collection Instruments*

The data collection instrument designed to study hoarding is the Hoarding Questionnaire (Appendix B), an original instrument designed specifically for this project,



which has items that measure the composite indicator emotional attachment. The single items that comprise the composite indicator include acquisition (10 items), possessiveness (23 items), and reluctance to discard (13 items).

While other instruments measuring hoarding have the advantage of having been tested and validated, particularly the widely-utilized Saving Inventory and Saving Inventory-Revised (Frost et al., 2004), an original scale was designed in order to study hoarding from the perspective of adult protective services workers. This perspective was determined to be more advantageous than testing hoarders because of hoarders' limited insight into their behavior and their reluctance to change their behavior or awareness. Furthermore, the original scale has the advantage of studying the extent to which each of the hoarding components—acquisition, possessiveness, and reluctance to discard—contributes to an explanation of hoarding.

Acquisition is measured through the following scales:

1. “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” four-point Likert scale (with “Not Sure” option)
  - Hoarders show a relentless need/desire to acquire more objects
  - Hoarders enjoy bringing home more and more objects into their homes
  - Hoarders spend a lot of time every week buying or acquiring items to add to their collection
2. “Very Sound Explanation for Hoarding” to “Not Sound Explanation for Hoarding” four-point Likert scale

- Hoarding elderly women prefer social isolation, so they hoard useless objects to keep people away
- Hoarders prefer their clutter over the company of friends and family.
- At a time when their health is failing and loved ones are dying, hoarding allows elderly women a sense of power.
- Hoarding elderly women, having been victims of ageism and sexism, hoard objects to assert control over their lives
- Hoarding reduces stress
- Hoarders accumulate more and more stuff in order to numb out negative feelings.

Possessiveness was measured through the following scales:

1. “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” four-point Likert scale (with “Not Sure” option)
  - Hoarders feel a sense of comfort with their hoarded possessions
  - Hoarders are convinced their hoarded collection has value
  - Hoarders feel they must maintain control over their possessions
  - Possessions feel like extensions of the hoarder’s identity
  - Hoarders keep objects because they may be of use some day
  - Hoarders keep objects because other people may benefit from them
  - Hoarders get angry if someone touches or moves their possessions
  - Because they worry they will forget something, hoarders save everything
  - Hoarders collect and save objects because they see the objects as useful

- Hoarders collect and save objects because they see the objects as functional
  - Hoarders collect and save objects because they see the objects as valuable
  - Hoarders collect and save objects because they see the objects as irreplaceable
2. “Very Sound Explanation for Hoarding” to “Not Sound Explanation for Hoarding” four-point Likert scale
- Hoarded objects provide a sense of comfort
  - Hoarded objects provide a sense of security
  - Hoarded objects may be of use some day in the future
  - Hoarders are strongly emotionally attached to their possessions
  - Hoarders really love their hoarded possessions

Failure to discard was measured through the following scales:

1. “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” four-point Likert scale (with “Not Sure” option)
- The thought of throwing away hoarded objects creates a lot of distress for the hoarder
  - Hoarders have great difficulty evaluating what objects are useful and what objects are useless
  - Hoarders cannot decide what objects to throw away and what objects to keep

- Hoarders feel intensely violated when their objects are discarded
  - Hoarders feel a strong sense of loss when their collections are removed
  - Hoarders plan to organize their hoarded collection “some day”
  - To hoarders, discarding items feels like losing part of the self
  - Hoarders are afraid of making mistakes when they dispose of items
2. “Very Sound Explanation for Hoarding” to “Not Sound Explanation for Hoarding” four-point Likert scale
- Hoarders have difficulty making decisions
  - Hoarders cannot decide what to throw away
  - Throwing away things creates so much stress for the hoarder that s/he avoids it as much as possible

### *Reliability and Validity*

To maximize reliability of the study, the instrument included several measures of emotional attachment to possessions, and the instrument was tested for internal consistency and stability. The scales have a combination of measures based on behaviors, attitudes, opinions, and beliefs that are formed through common workday experiences.

The survey was reviewed and pre-tested to evaluate internal consistency, construct and content validity, and stability of the instrument. Five staff in adult protective services and one methodologist reviewed the instrument and instructions, including (a) the state adult protective services program manager; (b) a consultant at the state level who is responsible for APS training curriculum, regulations, and policies; (c) a

regional specialist responsible for providing policy interpretation and training to local adult protective services workers; (d) a local adult protective services worker with a large hoarding caseload; (e) a supervisor of several adult protective services workers who works in a large urban area and is considered an expert in hoarding; and (f) a research methodologist with expertise in statistics, survey design, and data analysis who is on faculty at the School of Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University. This expert panel reviewed the instrument and provided feedback about measures that were vague or irrelevant to adult protective services, concepts that did not adequately measure hoarding, and instructions that were not clear.

### Qualitative Study

#### *Data Collection*

Five adult protective services workers were randomly selected from the adult protective service workers who returned surveys and volunteered for the telephone interview. Each of the five workers participated in an opened-ended telephone interview that lasted about one hour. The interview questions were designed to explore hoarding among elderly women, including the worker's perspective about why some elderly women hoard and exploring the concepts of acquiring objects, saving objects, and reluctance to discard objects. In this way, the qualitative analysis can be compared to the quantitative analysis in studying the extent to which hoarding involves acquisition, possessiveness, and failure to discard. Analyzing hoarding through a mixed methods approach and comparing qualitative and quantitative elements of hoarding allows for both a deep and a detailed examination of hoarding behavior.

*Interview*

The interviews were conducted by telephone with five volunteer adult protective services workers over a four-week period, with each interview lasting about one hour. The subjects were paid \$20 each for their participation. The interview addressed a number of areas related to hoarding, including the following.

- Tell me your experiences with elderly women who hoard.
- What were their homes like?
- What kinds of objects did they collect? Were there specific items they collected?
- Where did they get more objects? How often would they acquire more possessions?
- Who does the hoarder live with? Who does the hoarder have contact with? What are her relationships with others like?
- Have you had any cases of animal hoarding? What kinds of animals did they hoard? How did they respond when you expressed concern about the animals?
- Why do you think some elderly women like to hoard objects?
- What happens when you try to get the hoarder to dispose of items? How did the hoarder respond? How often did you visit the hoarder?
- What did you do to help the hoarders? How successful were you in intervening?
- What is needed for creating a successful outcome in hoarding cases?

- What do you think hoarding is about for these women?
- Why do you think some elderly women like to hoard possessions?
- What general observations have you seen with many of your hoarding cases?  
Are there commonalities among the hoarding cases?
- Would you say that people hoard due to mental illness or cognitive disorders or are they making a lifestyle choice? Are these items purposeful to them?
- What was it like when you tried to intervene? How did they respond to intervention?
- What are the current statuses of the case? What happened to the hoarder?

The interview utilized some probing in order to help workers express their opinion about why some elderly women hoard, either as a general theory or on a case-by-case basis.

The interview was designed, however, to be conversational and loosely structured to allow for the workers to feel comfortable and talk about the issues they felt were most important with hoarding. While the purpose and focus of the study was on hoarding among elderly women, the workers' accounts of non-elderly women and men who hoard were not discounted.

### *Reliability*

Recorded statements from the five volunteer workers were transcribed and the statements were categorized into at least one of five hoarding categories—acquisition, possessiveness, reluctance to discard, overall hoarding, and other. A total of three coders reviewed each statement and determined its fit into one of three additional categories—hoarding as a functional purpose, hoarding as an idiosyncratic behavior, or

unknown/neither. The coders were selected based on their ability to objectively analyze statements. In order to minimize bias and preconceived conclusions, the coders were persons with limited experience in hoarding and adult protective services.

Prior to the coding, the coders were trained by being given instructions on how to categorize, based on the definitions that follow. Statements that could be assigned to two categories were assigned to both categories and statements in which the assignment was unclear were categorized as unknown/neither.

The purpose of having the three coders review the same statements allows for greater reliability in the qualitative analysis than one coder. Statements were retained in the categories when at least two of the coders agree on the categorization.

### *Coding*

Each statement made by the adult protective services workers was transcribed and coded dependent on whether the subject was discussing hoarding in terms of acquisition, possessiveness, discarding, and other statements. In many cases, the statements were pattern-coded based on an interpretive analysis of their meaning because the content of the statements were not clearly empirically categorical.

The statements were then pattern-coded based on whether they reflect hoarding as having a functional purpose, whether hoarding is due to an individual or idiosyncratic characteristic (like mental illness or cognitive dysfunction), or indeterminable/miscellaneous. Statements that include both functional and idiosyncratic characteristics, as in the statement “She’s obsessive-compulsive (idiosyncratic) but she believes possessions give her comfort” (functional) were coded in both categories. To enhance



reliability, three coders independently categorized the statements into functional/ idiosyncratic/miscellaneous categories, with coding decisions based on at least coders reaching consensus.

Functional characteristics were operationally defined as the content of the statement indicates that the worker has an explanation for hoarding in which the hoarding is purposeful. The hoarding suggests an external locus of control to explain the hoarding; i.e., that the hoarder is collecting for the benefit of themselves or others, or is collecting objects for a purpose or reason. The reason or purpose could be sentimental or indicate that the object appears to have some utility. Some words that suggested functionality include words indicating enjoyment (“happy,” “enjoy,” “contented,” “favors,” “likes”), utility (“useful,” “of benefit to others,” “convenient”), future use (“save,” “keep,” “store away”), convenience (“available,” “handy”), emotion (“loss,” “anger,” “sad”), and purposefulness (“need,” “wanted,” “necessary”).

Idiosyncratic characteristics are operationally defined as the content indicates that the hoarder is acting without purpose, that the hoarding represents a personal dysfunction, mental illness, or disorder. The hoarding suggests an internal locus of control to explain the hoarding. Some words to look for include words indicating mental illness (“compulsive,” “OCD,” “crazy”), cognitive dysfunction (“dementia,” “disorganized thinking,” “attention problems”), and other pathology (“sick,” “disorder,” “illness”).

*Acquisition: The Acquiring of Possessions*

Each acquisition statement reflected the subject discussing how, when, or what a hoarder brings into the home, or why the hoarder acquires additional items. The content

of the statements typically included words and phrases such as “buy,” “rummaging through trashcans,” “collect” (in context of acquiring something new), “find,” “go to consignment stores,” “purchase,” “bring home,” “get,” “had to have,” “went shopping,” “went to the dump,” and “started accumulating things.”

*Possessiveness: The Saving of Objects*

Each possessiveness statement reflected what or why an elderly person maintains a collection of items that on the surface appear to have little or no value. The content of possessiveness statements indicates that the hoarder is maintaining objects, and includes such words as “collect,” (in context of maintaining a collection), “stacked throughout the home,” “saved,” “held onto,” “stored,” “kept,” “hoarded,” and “clutter.”

*Discarding: The Reluctance to Throw Away Possessions*

Each reluctance to discard statement related to the subjects discussing the hoarders’ concern, reluctance, inability, or resultant condition involved in throwing away items hoarded. The content of statements related to a reluctance to discard is illustrated through subjects’ statements about how hoarders were resistant to the act or the idea of throwing away objects, as with the following phrases: “lashed out in tears,” “developed an aggressive tendency,” “not happy about it,” “had a difficult time,” and “don’t want you to interfere” in connection with words like “dispose,” “threw away,” “trash,” “cleaned out,” “organized,” “discarded,” “removed,” “got rid of,” “put in boxes,” and “went through.”

## RESULTS

The Results chapter presents the major findings of the quantitative and qualitative analyses. The quantitative analyses explore the characteristics of the 315 survey respondents and their cases of hoarding, as well as the outcomes of item, factor and regression analyses. The qualitative analyses explore the characteristics of the five interview subjects and content analyses of the interviews. The Discussion chapter integrates the findings and draws conclusions about the findings in terms of the three components of hoarding—acquisition, possessiveness, and discarding.

### Assumptions

The three major assumptions that undergird the quantitative and qualitative data analyses are that hoarding serves a purpose, that hoarding is comprised of the three inter-related elements of acquisition, possessiveness, and failure to discard, and that mental illness and cognitive dysfunction are accompanying, but not totally explanatory, theories for hoarding. The first major assumption is that hoarders collect objects because they serve a purpose in their lives, that hoarders are emotionally attached to their possessions and that adult protective service workers have the knowledge, experience, and direct contact with hoarders that they can detect the purposefulness and emotional attachment in hoarding.

The second major assumption is that hoarding involves a need to acquire new items, save items, and keep these items long past their apparent usefulness. The

assumption is that subjects will explain hoarding behavior within those components as well as having overall general perspectives on hoarding that are based on hoarders being emotionally attached to their possessions and feeling the objects collected have utility or sentimentality. It is assumed that adult protective services workers will focus more on the issue of hoarders having problems discarding items than the components of acquisition or possessiveness because (a) workers are tasked with cleaning out the home or removing the hoarder for safety risk reasons; (b) the issue of discarding and extent to which the workers can engage the hoarder in a cleanout would occupy the majority of the worker-hoarder relationship; and (c) the workers will know little about how the hoarders acquire or save items for their collections.

Another major assumption of the study is that while hoarders may have mental illness and cognitive dysfunction present, they only offer part of the explanation for hoarding behavior. The assumption is that purposefulness and/or emotional attachment are elements that offer greater explanatory value for hoarding behavior than mental illness or cognitive dysfunction. The assumption is that adult protective service workers will discuss hoarding more within a framework of the needs that are satisfied through hoarding than they will dismiss hoarding as an aberration that is indicative of mental illness or cognitive dysfunction.

The aim of the quantitative and qualitative analyses is to explore the ways in which adult protective services workers explain hoarding behavior that they encounter. Because they are required to visit a hoarder's home because of a complaint, it is assumed that the workers enter the hoarding situation already perceiving the situation as

problematic and that they would see hoarding as being both abnormal and socially unconventional. The analyses compare the extent to which subjects perceive hoarding as functional or non-functional.

### Quantitative Findings

Of the 315 surveys mailed to all the Adult Protective Services (APS) workers in Virginia, a total of 134 (43%) were returned completed, exceeding the goal of 100 returns. Most of the survey respondents (65%) work in rural areas, with 19% in suburban localities and 16% in urban areas. Coincidentally, one-third of the respondents represented small agencies (one or two APS workers), one-third represented medium agencies (three or four APS workers), and one-third represented large agencies (five or more APS workers.)

### *Characteristics of Respondents*

The respondents are primarily women ( $n=114$ , 86%), with an average age of 45 ( $Mdn=46$ ,  $SD=11.0$ .) They tend to be new to both the APS program and to working in their current local department of social services, with about half having six or fewer years of service in APS (53%;  $M=7.8$  years,  $Mdn=6.0$  years,  $SD=6.5$ ) or in their local department of social services (50%;  $M=9.7$  years,  $Mdn=7.0$  years,  $SD=8.5$ .) Nearly all workers (97%) have seen cases of self-neglect among elderly persons during the last two years, primarily cases involving elderly women (63%). (The sum of elderly self-neglect cases reported on the survey was 5,263 for 134 workers in two years, far exceeding the 3,309 cases of self-neglect in Virginia in 2005. Assuming that some respondents had

given agency counts instead of worker counts, no additional analysis was performed on the self-neglect case variable.)

Most APS workers (97%) have at least a college education, typically with a major in Social Work (51%), with some majors in other social sciences or human services (38%), or other majors (11%). About one-fourth of the respondents have a graduate degree (24%).

The survey targeted APS workers, though several respondents ( $n=38$ , 29%) had supervisory/ administrative responsibilities in addition to direct services. There are 27 workers (21%) who work in adult protective services as well as other programs at the local department of social services, typically in the smaller rural agencies in which APS caseloads are too small to necessitate a full-time worker devoted to APS cases.

The respondents have a wealth of experience addressing cases of hoarding among the elderly, with only 12 workers not seeing any hoarding cases. The 134 responding APS workers have seen 1154 cases of elderly hoarding in the last two years (range=0-130,  $M=9$  cases,  $Mdn=4$  cases,  $SD=18.9$ ). Workers described characteristics of a total of 118 hoarding cases.

#### *Characteristics of Hoarding Cases*

APS workers' most recent cases of hoarding involved primarily elderly women (72%) who were at least 70 years old. Of the recent cases seen by APS workers, most (52%) were 70 to 80 years old, with an average age of 73 ( $Mdn=75$ ,  $SD=10.7$ ).

The most common items hoarded are printed materials, with junk mail being found in 63 % of the cases and newspapers being found in 60%of the cases. Two-thirds

(67%) of hoarders collected food or food items such as containers and bags. Other items hoarded by at least half of the cases include trash (59%) and clothing (54%). Twenty-eight workers wrote in additional items hoarded, including appliances, ceramic figurines, furniture, bottles, boxes, linen, and tools.

Animals were hoarded by 36 (31%) of the hoarding cases seen by APS workers, with animal hoarding more common among women than men. Among those who hoard animals, the animals collected most often are cats (64% of cases) or dogs (44%), though six cases (17%) hoard farm animals. Only five cases hoard both cats and dogs, with two of these cases also keeping a large number of farm animals.

As shown in Table 1, hoarders typically collect some type of printed materials such as newspapers, brochures, books, magazines, junk mail, catalogs, and cards/letters. In all, 80% of the cases hoard some form of printed material and 67% of the cases hoard either food, containers, bags, or a combination of these food items. The most common hoarding case involves a combination of printed materials, food, and clothing, without animals, comprising 29% of all hoarding cases. Ten percent of the hoarding cases involve a combination of printed materials, food, clothing, and animals.

The survey asked workers to indicate the presence of a psychological or cognitive disorders present in their most recent case of hoarding, based either on a diagnosis from a doctor or their own professional opinion. Of the recent hoarding cases, only ten (9%) cases were considered by workers to have no psychological or cognitive disorder. The elderly hoarders commonly (91%) had at least one disorder, typically obsessive-compulsive disorder (47%), depression (44%), dementia (39%), other confusion/

disorientation (26%), or memory loss (13%). In all, about half (51%) of the cases indicated some type of cognitive disorder—either dementia, memory loss, or some other confusion or disorientation. Only 13 cases showed indicators of bipolar disorder, brain trauma, or schizophrenia. Because the survey requested the workers' opinions about the presence of disorders, however, these findings are considered preliminary and may not necessarily be able to be corroborated through medical/psychological evaluations.

According to the survey respondents, most persons with hoarding behavior have a combination of disorders, typically a cognitive disorder in addition to a mental illness. Cases sometimes show only a single disorder, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (9%), depression (4%), or cognitive disorder (13%), but the variety of combinations exemplify how hoarding is seen as not only related to a single cause, but is related to a variety of mental impairments. Other disorders include bipolar disorder, brain trauma, and schizophrenia, as well as the written-in other disorders such as mental retardation, substance abuse, and paranoia. Table 2 demonstrates that workers most commonly attribute multiple diagnoses to hoarding cases.

The workers' descriptions of the interiors of hoarders' homes suggest severe disorder and dangerous living conditions. Among the 118 most recent hoarding cases, clutter was stacked on top of ovens or counters (74%), sinks (53%), beds (62%), or furniture (88%), with several hoarders ( $n=42$ , 36%) piling clutter on top of all of these items. The clutter inhibited movement by creating narrow passageways in 90 (76%) cases, and in 62 (53%) cases, doors and/or windows were blocked by clutter.



Table 1

*Categorized Objects Hoarded by Gender of Hoarder*

n=118	Males	Females	Total
Printed materials	82%	80%	80%
Food items	70%	67%	67%
Trash	61%	59%	59%
Clothing	33%	63%	54%
Animals	21%	34%	31%
Other	24%	23%	23%

Based on the workers' close-ended responses about the conditions of the homes, the researcher rated living situations as having moderate, severe, or very severe hoarding conditions. Moderate was considered when eating, sleeping, or bathing were impaired because there was clutter on the counters, appliances, oven, sinks, bathtub, furniture or bed, or because there was extensive debris on the floor or in the yard, or there was no water. Severe conditions are evident when the worker identifies health/safety risks and was defined as having fire hazards, including narrow passageways due to clutter, and doors or windows blocked by clutter. Extreme conditions involve the presence of feces/urine, roaches, mice or other vermin, or rotting food/trash. Figure 1 illustrates that the majority (68%) of the hoarding cases seen by workers are extreme. The severity of hoarding is significantly different ( $F=5.54, p<.05$ ) between those who hoard animals and those who hoard other objects.

The most common interventions used with hoarders include medical evaluation (32%), the APS worker working with the client on home organization (26%), case management monitoring (47%), or client removed from home (24%). Some of the interventions suggested positive outcomes which would allow the client to stay in her home, including the client and APS worker working collaboratively or home-based services being accepted and utilized. Other interventions suggest negative outcomes, such as removal of the client, removal of possessions against the hoarder's will, condemning of the home, guardianship sought, animals being forcibly removed and possibly euthanized, or instances in which the worker wrote in that the client refused services or died. The other interventions, such as psychiatric assessments or placement in

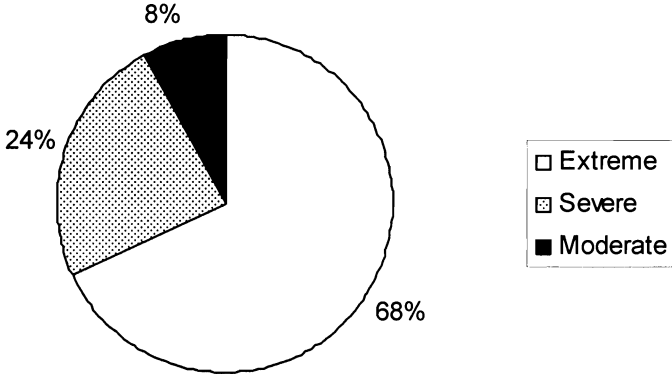
Table 2

*Disorders Observed in Hoarders*

	<i>n</i>	%
Specific disorders	40	34%
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)	10	9%
Depression	5	4%
Cognitive disorder	17	14%
Other disorders	8	7%
Dual diagnoses	26	23%
OCD and depression	10	9%
OCD and cognitive disorder	6	5%
Depression and cognitive disorder	10	9%
Multiple disorders	52	57%
OCD, depression, cognitive disorder	12	10%
OCD and other disorders	4	3%
Depression and other disorders	2	2%
Cognitive disorder and other disorders	7	6%
OCD, cognitive disorder, other disorders	2	2%
Depression, cognitive disorder, & others	2	2%
OCD, depression, & other disorders	6	5%
OCD, depression, cognitive dis., & others	5	4%
Other combinations	14	12%

Figure 1

*Severity of Hoarding Conditions*



a nursing home or assisted living facility, the client moving in with a family member, hospitalization, case management, medication, or counseling could be either positive or negative, so were coded “neutral.” As demonstrated in Figure 2, the intervention most frequently utilized (45%) had a negative outcome. (A total of 11 cases had both positive and negative outcomes.)

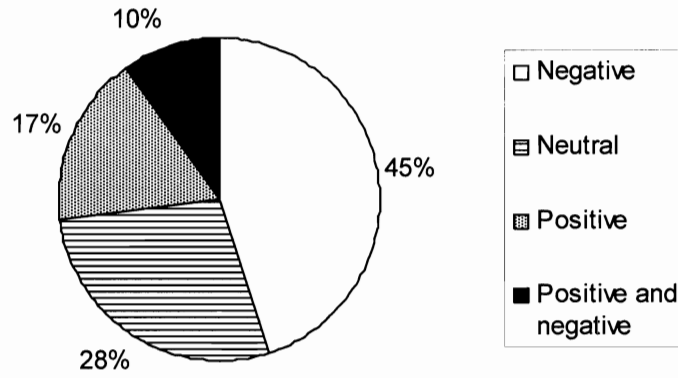
### *Item Analyses*

Survey questions about hoarding explanations were primarily comprised of an index utilizing a four-point “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” scale and an index utilizing a four-point “Not Sound Explanation for Hoarding” to “Very Sound Explanation for Hoarding” scale. In addition to questions about specific hoarding cases and demographics, the other two survey questions were close-ended questions about the extent to which elderly women who hoard are emotionally attached to their collections. Appendix C details the findings for each question.

In the agreement scale questions, respondents tended to respond with “Agree,” with few “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree” responses. As shown in Table 3, the “Agree” response was the average response to questions about acquisition, possessiveness, and discarding. Some questions, however, had an average score of “Strongly Agree,” including one question measuring possessiveness (“Hoarders feel they must maintain control over their possessions,”) and four questions measuring discarding (“The thought of throwing away hoarded objects creates a lot of distress for the hoarder;” “Hoarders have great difficulty evaluating what objects are useful and what objects are

Figure 2

*Perceived Outcome of Hoarding Cases*



useless;” “Hoarders feel intensely violated when their objects are discarded;” and “Hoarders feel a strong sense of loss when their collections are removed.”)

In the explanation scale questions, the average score was either “Fairly Sound Explanation for Hoarding” or “Somewhat Sound Explanation for Hoarding.” Only one item (“Hoarders cannot decide what to throw away”) had an average score that reflected a “Very Sound Explanation for Hoarding.” The item “Hoarding elderly women prefer social isolation, so they hoard useless objects to keep people away” had average scores indicating that this item offered the least amount of explanation about hoarding.

In addition to the scale items, two survey questions asked about the extent to which elderly women who hoard are emotionally attached to their possessions. As demonstrated in Table 4, workers perceive hoarding elderly women as being very emotionally attached to their possessions, even more emotionally attached than non-hoarding elderly women. Female APS workers are significantly more likely than male APS workers to view hoarders as being emotionally attached to their collections ( $\chi^2=7.606$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $n=132$ ,  $p=.055$ ). However, when asked if hoarding elderly women are more emotionally attached to their possessions than non-hoarding elderly women, the male APS workers were more likely than female workers to perceive greater emotional attachment ( $\chi^2=7.169$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $n=132$ ,  $p=.067$ ), but male responses had much greater variance in scores than did females.

### *Data Analyses*

Missing data was found in 47 of 54 interval-ratio variables. To determine whether the missing data represents a random pattern, dummy variables were created for

Table 3

*Items on Hoarding Questionnaire*

(N=134)

1: Strongly disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Agree; 4: Strongly agree

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1-Relentless need to acquire	3.11	.690
2-Enjoy bringing more objects	3.17	.699
3-Spend a lot of time buying or acquiring	2.90	.718
4-Feel a sense of comfort	3.45	.569
5-Convinced their collection has value	3.41	.651
6-Must maintain control over possessions	3.54	.529
7-Feel like extensions of hoarder's identity	3.25	.584
8-Objects may be of use someday	3.46	.621
9-Other people may benefit	2.54	.881
10-Get angry if other people touch or move	3.32	.596
11-Worry they will forget something	2.92	.716
Hoarding because objects are...		
12-...useful	3.28	.596
13-...functional	3.15	.643
14-...valuable	3.25	.665
15-...irreplaceable	3.14	.662
16-Throwing away objects causes distress	3.58	.510



17-Difficulty evaluating usefulness/uselessness	3.60	.549
18-Cannot decide to throw away or keep	3.49	.646
19-Feel intensely violated when discarded	3.64	.526
20-Feel a strong sense of loss	3.63	.514
21-Plan to organize their collection some day	3.25	.740
22-Discarding items feels like losing part of self	3.29	.560
23-Afraid of making mistakes	3.19	.654
<hr/> <p>1: Not sound explanation for hoarding</p> <p>2: Fairly sound explanation for hoarding</p> <p>3: Somewhat sound explanation for hoarding</p> <p>4: Very sound explanation for hoarding</p>		
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
<hr/>		
24-Hoarders prefer social isolation	1.53	.864
25-Hoarders prefer clutter over company	1.93	.970
26-Hoarding allows a sense of power	2.40	.982
27-Hoarding due to ageism and sexism	2.07	.975
28-Hoarding reduces stress	2.19	1.091
29-Accumulate to numb negative feelings	2.06	.987
30-Objects provide sense of comfort	3.29	.812
31-Objects provide sense of security	3.34	.796
32-Hoarded objects may be of use some day	3.16	.988
33-Hoarders are strongly emotionally attached	3.40	.814

34-Hoarders really love their possessions	2.90	1.082
35-Hoarders have difficulty making decisions	3.19	1.027
36-Hoarders cannot decide what to throw away	3.52	.801
37-Hoarder avoids the stress of throwing away	3.49	.773

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Table 4

*Emotional Attachment of Hoarding Elderly Women to Their Possessions*

	<u>APS Workers</u>		
	Male	Female	Total
<u>Extent of emotional attachment to collection</u>			
Significantly emotionally attached	39%	55%	53%
Emotionally attached	33%	29%	29%
Somewhat emotionally attached	22%	16%	17%
Not at all emotionally attached	6%	0%	1%
<u>Possession attachment compared to non-hoarders</u>			
Significantly more attached	61%	46%	49%
More emotionally attached	22%	36%	34%
Somewhat more attached	6%	16%	14%
Not at all more attached	11%	2%	3%

the 47 variables, cases with missing data and cases without missing data. Two variables—the comparison of hoarders to non-hoarders and emotional attachment of hoarding—acted as indicators of overall hoarding and were utilized to compare missing and non-missing values. The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) in three variables—the extent that hoarders see items as being functional, items being irreplaceable (comparison variable only), and using gentle persuasion as an intervention strategy (comparison variable only).

The Missing Values Analysis run in SPSS 14.0 revealed that the number of self-neglect cases was missing in 12% of the cases, the number of hoarders seen was missing in 7% of the cases, rating of health/safety risk to the community was missing in 8% of the cases, rating of health/safety risk to others in client's home was missing in 6% of the cases, rating of using psychiatric treatment was missing in 6% of the cases, rating of using gentle persuasion was missing in 8% of the cases, and the age of the APS worker was missing in 6% of the cases. High extremes were found in all of these variables except using gentle persuasion and age of the APS worker. All other variables indicated fewer than 5% missing data.

Through the SPSS Missing Values Analysis (MVA), regression estimates were calculated for each of the 47 variables with missing values. The regression statistics were then substituted for the missing values in the corresponding variables, for a total of 213 substitutions. The “don't know” responses were transformed into “missing value” responses, which were replaced by regression means that were rounded to the nearest nominal score. To create a scale in which high scores indicate greater explainability of

hoarding, the “strongly agree” and “very sound explanation” responses were recoded as the highest (instead of the lowest) values, and the other scores were similarly recoded into higher or lower values.

### *Factor Analyses*

To identify variables that reduce the cohesiveness of the hoarding scale, an item analysis was conducted to examine the variance of each independent variable. Among the 23 items with a four-point scale from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree,” item #9 (“Hoarders keep objects because other people may benefit from them”) indicated much lower inter-item correlation than other items, and was eliminated in the factor analysis.

A factor analysis of the 36 hoarding scale items found 13 items with loadings less than .7--items #4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 16, 19-22, 24, 28, and 37. No items were  $<.59$ . The Factor Analysis utilized a Principal Components Analysis with Varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization. The rotation converged in 11 iterations yielding 10 components extracted. The first 3 factors explained 42.10% of the variance.

A second factor analysis was conducted utilizing principal axis to force three factors. The rotated component matrix indicated that of the 23 items, most items strongly correlated ( $r > .5$ ) on only one factor. Item 5 was eliminated because it correlated .47 and .44 on two factors, and items 32, 33, 35, and 36 were eliminated for having low correlations ( $r < .4$ ) on all three factors.

The final factor analysis utilized Principal Axis factoring with Varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization of 18 components into 3 factors, requiring 12 iterations. The

resultant Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy = .74,  $p < .00$ , explaining 53.12% of the variance in the first three factors. The factor score covariance matrix revealed high loadings in each of the three factors, as indicated in Table 5.

The first factor had four pairings with high ( $r > .5$ ) correlations. Items 12 (“Hoarders collect and save objects because they see the objects as useful”) and 13 (“Hoarders collect and save objects because they see the objects as functional”) was strongly correlated ( $r = .74$ ). Items 14 (“Hoarders collect and save objects because they see the objects as valuable”) and 15 (“Hoarders collect and save objects because they see the objects as irreplaceable”) were also strongly correlated ( $r = .62$ ). Similarly, items 13 (“Hoarders collect and save objects because they see the objects as functional”) and 15 (“Hoarders collect and save objects because they see the objects as irreplaceable”) were highly correlated ( $r = .52$ ), as well as items 17 (“Hoarders have great difficulty evaluating what objects are useful and what objects are useless”) and 18 (“Hoarders cannot decide what objects to throw away and what objects to keep”) ( $r = .66$ ).

On the second factor, correlations were high ( $r > .5$ ) on two pairings. Items 26 (“At a time when their health is failing and loved ones are dying, hoarding allows elderly women a sense of power”) and Item 27 (“Hoarding elderly women, having been victims of ageism and sexism, hoard objects to assert control over their lives”) were highly correlated ( $r = .60$ ). Similarly, Items 25 (“Hoarders prefer their clutter over the company of friends and family”) and Item 29 (“Hoarders accumulate more and more stuff in order to numb out negative feelings”) were strongly correlated ( $r = .51$ ). The third factor showed high correlations between all three of the items that comprise the factor,

Table 5

*Factor Score Covariance Matrix*

Factor	I	II	III
	Characteristics	Powerfulness	Acquisition
1—Characteristics	.838	.050	.036
2—Powerfulness	.050	.795	.022
3—Acquisition	.036	.022	.891

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser

Normalization. Factor Scores Method: Regression.

including Item 1-“Hoarders show a relentless need/desire to acquire more objects,” Item 2-“Hoarders enjoy bringing more and more objects into their homes,” and Item 3-“Hoarders spend a lot of time every week buying or acquiring items to add to their collection.” As shown in Table 6, the Pearson correlations are high, positive, and significant ( $p < .00$ .)

Table 7 summarizes the final 18 components and their groupings within the three factors after Principal Axis Factoring with Varimax rotation. The Varimax rotation converged the items in five iterations. The first factor seems to reflect perceived qualities about the objects (i.e., hoarded possessions are useful, functional, valuable, and irreplaceable,) that the attributes of the possessions are cherished (possessions offer security, hoarders love their possessions) and that hoarders over-value possessions (difficulty evaluating usefulness/uselessness, cannot decide what to throw away or keep, afraid of making mistakes, and need to maintain control over possessions). This ten-item factor is labeled Characteristics because these items reflect characteristics of the possessions and the hoarders.

The second factor, comprised of five items, appears to reflect how hoarding can represent feeling mastery and control in the hoarder’s life, particularly how hoarding exemplifies a need to control one’s environment at a time when an elderly woman may feel her health and social life are outside her ability to control. This factor was labeled Powerfulness because these items suggest that hoarding exemplifies a need to maintain power over one’s life and environment. The items in this factor with the highest loadings are items 26--“At a time when their health is failing and loved ones are dying, hoarding



Table 6

*Correlations of the Three Items in Third Factor (N=133)*

	1-Relentless need to acquire	2-Enjoy bringing more objects into home	3-Spend a lot of time buying or acquiring
1-Relentless need to acquire	r=1.00 p<.000	r=.739 p<.000	r=.601 p<.000
2-Enjoy bringing more objects	r=.739 p<.000	r=1.00 p<.000	r=.621 p<.000

Table 7

*Final Factor Principal Axis Factoring/Varimax Factor Structure Loadings (N=133)*


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	Factor 1	Factor II	Factor III
1-Relentless need to acquire	.174	.107	.784
2-Enjoy bringing more objects	.143	.077	.909
3-Spend a lot of time buying or acquiring	.148	.103	.651
6-Must maintain control over possessions	.453	.086	.218
12-Hoarding because objects are useful	.632	.015	.155
13-Hoarding because objects are functional	.570	.019	.159
14-Hoarding because objects are valuable	.619	.213	.303
15-Hoarding b/c objects are irreplaceable	.701	.238	.182
17-Difficulty evaluating useful/useless	.686	-.064	-.014
18-Cannot decide to throw away or keep	.593	-.011	.023
23-Afraid of making mistakes	.487	.171	.033
25-Hoarders prefer clutter over company	-.021	.509	.263
26-Hoarding allows a sense of power	.136	.751	-.019
27-Ageism and sexism	-.023	.669	.030
29-Accumulate to numb negative feelings	.141	.660	.219
30-Objects provide sense of comfort	.442	.461	-.019
31-Objects provide sense of security	.460	.423	-.038
34-Hoarders really love their possessions	.350	.248	.218

allows elderly women a sense of power” and 27--“Hoarding elderly women, having been victims of ageism and sexism, hoard objects to assert control over their lives.” Other items in this Powerfulness component include preferring clutter over people, numbing negative feelings, and possessions providing comfort.

The third factor is labeled Acquisition because these items show how hoarding starts as a need to accumulate more objects. The three items in this factor are items 1-3: “Hoarders show a relentless need/desire to acquire more objects,” “Hoarders enjoy bringing more and more objects into their homes,” and “Hoarders spend a lot of time every week buying or acquiring items to add to their collection.”

The resulting scale comprised of 18 items has high internal reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .84. Tukey’s Test for Nonadditivity shows significant multiplicative interaction ( $p<.01$ ,  $F=78.30$ ,  $df=17$ ) and the Hotelling’s T-Squared Test indicates high reliability ( $p<.01$ ,  $F=26.55$ ).

### *Regression Analyses*

To ascertain the extent to which factor scores can be predicted by demographic data, the three factors were saved as new variables and entered into a SPSS regression analysis. The demographic data utilized in the regression model included level of education, number of years working in adult protective services, number of years working in the current local department of social services, percentage of time spent in direct services (investigations, case management, and other direct contact), and the number of hoarding cases seen in the last two years. The assumption was that factor scores could be predicted based on a combination of these independent variables.

The five independent variables (education, years in agency, years in APS, time in direct services, and hoarding cases) were entered into the SPSS regression analysis so that all variables remain in the final model. The results indicated that the model was the most viable for the third factor (Acquisition), but not the other two factors—Characteristics and Powerfulness. The Adjusted R Square of .08 explains 8% of the variance ( $R=.348$ ,  $df=5$ , significant F change=.016, Durbin Watson =1.694.)

*Acquisition: The Acquiring of Possessions*

As indicated in the factor analyses, the quantitative findings demonstrate that acquisition is a major component of hoarding, with high loadings on three acquisition items—hoarding involves a relentless need to acquire more objects, elderly women who hoard enjoy bringing more and more objects into the home, and elderly women who hoard spend a lot of time either buying or otherwise acquiring more possessions to bring into the home, items that were highly correlated and with high mean scores. The more education the APS worker has, the longer the length of service in the local agency and in APS, the higher the percentage of time doing direct service, and the more cases that the APS worker has seen in the last two years of elderly women who hoard, then the higher the predicted score in acquisition.

Table 8 reflects the findings of the acquisition agreement scale items, illustrating how workers see acquisition as both a need and a pleasure. At the same time, workers tend to indicate that the acquisition items of social isolation, stress, and powerlessness are not viable explanations for hoarding. The majority of APS workers responded that the following statements were either fairly sound or not sound explanations for hoarding: (a)

Hoarding elderly women prefer social isolation, so they hoard useless objects to keep people away (84%); (b) Hoarders prefer their clutter over the company of friends and family (70%); (c) At a time when their health is failing and loved ones are dying, hoarding allows elderly women a sense of power (54%); (d) Hoarding elderly women, having been victims of ageism and sexism, hoard objects to assert control over their lives (69%); (e) Hoarding reduces stress (58%); and (f) Hoarders accumulate more and more stuff in order to numb out negative feelings (68%).

*Possessiveness: The Saving of Objects*

As reflected in the scaled items on the survey, APS workers perceive hoarding as comprising possessiveness, the need to collect, save, and maintain objects. Nearly all of workers strongly agreed (56%) or agreed (43%) with the statement that “hoarders feel they must maintain control over their possessions.” Workers also strongly agreed that (a) Hoarders feel a sense of comfort with their possessions (49%); (b) Hoarders are convinced their collection has value (49%); (c) Possessions feel like extensions of the hoarder’s identity (32%); (d) Hoarders keep objects because they may be of use some day (52%); and (e) Hoarders get angry if someone touches or moves their possessions (39%).

Fewer than 7% of the workers disagreed or strongly disagreed with these statements. Workers also strongly agreed or agreed that women who hoard collect and save objects because they see the objects as useful (93%), functional (86%), valuable (87%), and irreplaceable (84%) and because they worry they will forget something, hoarders save everything (79%).

Table 8

*APS Workers' Level of Agreement with Acquisition Items (N=134)*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Hoarders show a relentless need/desire to acquire more objects.	28%	56%	14%	2%
Hoarders enjoy bringing more and more objects into their homes.	33%	53%	13%	1%
Hoarders spend a lot of time every week buying or acquiring items to add to their collection.	19%	52%	27%	1%

The one statement in the possessiveness component in which workers' responses were varied was "Hoarders keep objects because other people may benefit from them," with half the workers agreeing (50%) and half disagreeing (50%). Specifically, 16% strongly agreed; 34% agreed, 40% disagreed and 10% strongly disagreed.

Possessiveness scale items provide some explanation for hoarding behavior among elderly women. At least half of the workers indicated that the following possessiveness items provided sound (somewhat or very sound) explanations for hoarding: (a) Hoarded objects provide a sense of comfort (84%); (b) Hoarded objects provide a sense of security (84%); (c) Hoarded objects may be of use some day in the future (77%); (d) Hoarders are strongly emotionally attached to their possessions (84%); and (e) Hoarders really love their hoarded possessions (66%). Over half of the workers indicated that hoarded objects provide a sense of security (52%) and that hoarders are strongly emotionally attached to their possessions (58%) provide very sound explanations for hoarding among elderly women.

*Discarding: The Reluctance to Throw Away Possessions*

Workers tend to agree more strongly and more frequently about the group of questions related to discarding than the questions related to acquisition or possessiveness. The majority agreed or strongly agreed with the statements: (a) The thought of throwing away hoarded objects creates a lot of distress for the hoarder (99%); (b) Hoarders have great difficulty evaluating what objects are useful and what objects are useless (97%); (c) Hoarders cannot decide what objects to throw away and what objects to keep (93%); (d) Hoarders feel intensely violated when their objects are discarded (98%); (e) Hoarders feel

a strong sense of loss when their collections are removed (98%); (f) Hoarders plan to organize their hoarded collection “some day” (85%); (g) To hoarders, discarding items feels like losing part of the self (95%); and (h) Hoarders are afraid of making mistakes when they dispose of items (87%).

As shown in Table 9, problems with discarding possessions, whether due to difficulties making decisions or stress, provide reasonable explanations for hoarding behavior among elderly women. The majority of workers found discarding items to be very sound explanations for hoarding behavior among elderly women.

### Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings explore the results of interviews with five subjects, adult protective services (APS) workers who were employed in local departments of social services throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. Each interview lasted about one hour and involved a dialogue about the workers’ experiences with hoarders, their beliefs about why some people hoard, and how they worked with hoarding cases.

### *Subjects*

A total of 31 adult protective services workers volunteered to be interviewed about their experiences and perspectives on hoarding. The potential subjects indicated their interest in being interviewed when they completed and returned the hoarding survey. Of the 31 volunteers, five were randomly selected—Anne, Bob, Carol, Donna, and Emily (pseudonyms). Table 10 summarizes characteristics of each subject.



Table 9

*Reluctance to Discard as Providing Explanation for Hoarding Behavior*

	<u>Explanation for Hoarding Behavior</u>			
	Not Sound	Fairly Sound	Somewhat Sound	Very Sound
Hoarders have difficulty making decisions.	11%	11%	25%	52%
Hoarders cannot decide what to throw away.	4%	8%	20%	68%
Throwing away things creates so much stress for the hoarder that she avoids it as much as possible.	3%	8%	25%	64%

*Anne*

Anne is a new adult protective services worker, having started only nine months ago. She is 39 years old and has a college degree with a major in psychology. She works at a large local department of social services located in an urban area in the western part of Virginia. The conversation with Anne showed her to be very skilled in working with hoarders, patient, compassionate, and engaging.

Anne sees about one case of elderly self-neglect each month and has been involved in the investigation of some hoarding cases. In her most recent hoarding case, an elderly woman was hoarding knickknacks, clothes, books, and junk mail. Clutter was stacked on top of furniture to such an extent that the woman slept in a chair in the living room because her bed was piled with her collection of things.

Anne explained that her cases would hoard out of a need to stay connected with their pasts. In one case, an elderly man hoarded newspapers because they gave him ideas for developing inventions and in another case, an elderly woman hoarded ceramic figurines to remind herself of her childhood. She suggested that the hoarded items either reminded the hoarder of family members or represented family history.

Anne suggested that the hoarded items help some people cope with loss or absence. The void may not necessarily be human contact, as when her case of an elderly man demonstrated that he was much more willing to allow his wife and step-daughter to move out of the home than to part with his collection of newspapers and other printed material.

Table 10

*Characteristics of Interviewed Subjects*


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Worker	Age	Degree/	<u>Length of Service (Years)</u>		Location	Hoarding Cases-
		Discipline	Agency	APS		Last 2 Years
Anne	39	BS/Psychology	1	1	Urban	12
Bob	53	MS/Counseling	11	10	Rural	10
Carol	43	BSW/Soc Work	16	7	Mixed	10
Donna	35	MS/Counseling	1.5	1.5	Urban	16
Emily	43	MSW/Soc Work	13	7	Rural	1

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She equates the hoarding with an addiction that becomes out of control and Anne discussed how the hoarders feel a sense of personal loss when she tried to help them declutter the home. “He really felt his space was invaded.” She was able to engage one hoarder in cleaning out her home by making frequent visits and inviting the woman to participate in the process of organizing the home. Anne suggested that hoarding is a lifetime process that necessitates a slow, consistent, methodical process of organizing and planning in collaboration with the hoarder, allowing the hoarder to choose what items to discard.

Forming a relationship with the client became the key in Anne being able to affect a change in the case of the woman hoarder.

It's a matter of developing a relationship and not allowing the client to feel that they are accused of doing something wrong or allowing the client to think they're going to be evicted, keeping in mind that these are people that have been told they're going to have to go into a nursing home, they're going to have to leave their own space, go live with someone else (Anne).

Anne indicated that adult protective services can only help to a certain limit and she recommended that hoarding support groups be formed.

### *Bob*

Bob is a thoughtful, caring senior social worker in a rural county in Virginia. He has worked in adult protective services for ten years and sees about five cases of self-neglect and maybe one case of hoarding each year or two. He is 53 years old and has a Master's degree in counseling and guidance.

His most recent case of hoarding involved a 65-year old woman who routinely scavenged at the landfill, loading up her pickup truck with assorted items she planned to repair or use. Some of his views about hoarding stem from his experience with his mother, who hoards mostly food, which he explained was due to having very little to eat during her childhood. He believes that the best explanations for hoarding are that hoarders think the objects will be of use some day, that they cannot decide what to throw away, and that throwing away things creates so much stress for the hoarder that s/he avoids it as much as possible. Still, he was hesitant to articulate a general theory about hoarding because each case varied.

One of the major themes Bob discussed is the social isolation of hoarders, how they had limited contact with family, friends, or neighbors. He suggested that hoarded items, particularly animals, can be used as a substitute for human relationships. “In retrospect, you can see that...the cats are giving these people affection where apparently nobody else in the community is and the children weren't.”

### *Carol*

Carol is a 43-year-old adult protective services worker who works in a local department of social services in the mountains of Virginia, where she has worked for 16 years. She has a bachelor’s degree in Social Work and has been working in the adult protective services program for over seven years. In the last two years, she’s seen ten cases of hoarding and is particularly concerned about animal hoarding cases.

Carol’s most recent hoarding case involved an elderly couple with 13 Chihuahuas whose home and yard were extremely filthy. The man suffered from pulmonary

problems due to the toxins and ammonia present in the home, and Carol's main intervention strategy was to help educate the couple about the health risks inherent in keeping so many dogs in the home without caring for their needs. In another case, Carol worked with a family on removing an elderly woman from her house in which she kept 95 cats.

Carol talked at length about two cases of animal hoarding and another case in which two elderly men compulsively bought items from the home shopping network. Carol discussed the problems in trying to intervene in the cases, and often expressed disgust that the focus of an animal hoarding case is on the animals' condition and not on the individuals. "What I'm discovering in my job and in what I'm doing...there is actually more that can be done for the animal than for the people." She suggested that the courts be empowered to intervene in these animal hoarding cases to mandate psychological evaluations.

One of the things we have to look at is, is there a legal way to intervene on behalf of these individuals, recognizing that we are dealing with a mental ailment, recognizing that we are dealing with not only issues affecting their health, but could conceivably be affecting the health of others (Carol).

Carol perceives hoarding as an indicator of mental illness, though she doesn't specify a diagnosis. She notes that hoarders show a "huge disconnect between what the reality of the conditions are and their perception of it" by proclaiming their love for their pets at the same time they neglect the animals' care.

*Donna*

Donna is a 35-year-old woman with a Master's degree in counseling who works in a heavily populated city on the Eastern shore. She has worked in adult protective services only 18 months, but she's already seen 16 cases of hoarding among elderly clients. She talked in detail about six hoarding cases—two cases with elderly men, one case with a young man, two cases with elderly women, and one case of an elderly couple hoarding. With each account, Donna would talk about how the hoarding helped them maintain some independence and control, particularly in cases in which the hoarder had suffered some significant loss.

One of the cases involved a highly-educated woman in a wheelchair who hoarded books. Unlike most hoarders who tend to clutter indiscriminately, this woman kept the house immaculate except for her bedroom, which was stacked with books, food, and printed material. In recent years, the woman suffered the deaths of two children and her mother, and was paralyzed due to a gunshot wound as a result of a domestic dispute. "She's in an unhealthy marriage, she's lost her children, her Mom, and it's almost like 'Nobody's going to take this from me, I earned this'."

Like all the hoarders she described, Donna shared several very positive comments about the client, often trying to see the situation from her point of view. She understands how collected items, while seemingly worthless to others, can be extremely important to the hoarder. "I've seen a lot of individuals that would refuse assisted living or companion services or nursing homes because they didn't want to give up the items."

One of the central themes of Donna's interview was her ability to establish a connection with her clients. "Yes, I try to build a rapport. I don't go in trying to change their lifestyle because, for some of them, that is the way they live." Donna suggests her role as an adult protective services worker is to involve the client in making decisions and respecting the client's right of self-determination. "Unlike children, adults if they haven't been declared incapacitated, they have the right to make poor decisions and we have to respect their boundaries and just try to advocate strenuously. At some point, we just have to step back and say, 'I will just monitor you; I'm here if you need me.'"

### *Emily*

Emily is a very pleasant, knowledgeable, and insightful senior social worker in a rural area about an hour's drive to a major metropolitan area in Virginia. She's worked in adult protective services for seven years and in other local social services programs an additional six years. She's 43 years old and has a Master's degree in social work.

Emily sees about one case of self-neglect in a typical month, and rarely sees hoarding cases. Her most recent hoarding case was about two years ago and involved an 83-year old woman with paranoid schizophrenia who hoarded newspapers, magazines, and other printed material, and recorded in journals careful documentation of conversations, which she maintained for several years. The hoarder refused adult protective services or the sheriff's department from entering her house, but she enjoyed the contact. Adult protective services eventually had a judge issue a temporary detention order for a psychotic evaluation and the client was eventually placed in an assisted living facility in another locality.



Emily would talk about her hoarding cases with clear, vivid memories of them. The three hoarding cases she focused on primarily involved an elderly woman who had about 27 cats; the woman with paranoid schizophrenia who was detained for brandishing a rifle; and an elderly man who has kept all types of printed materials for the last 20 years.

Emily seems to have formed close relationships with her hoarding cases, and she credits her ability to intervene on the closeness of her relationships. She talks empathetically about how one hoarder would have been happier among her collection of trash than in a safer environment, an assisted living facility. She is very positive in her descriptions of clients and has extensive knowledge of the social, financial, and medical conditions of her cases.

Emily explains hoarding as being driven by fear. She sees hoarders as having fears that limit their ability to throw away items, which is also manifested in paranoia and obsessive compulsive disorder behaviors, and she considers psychiatric treatment to be one of the most effective intervention strategies. Emily's perspective is that the most sound explanations for hoarding are that the hoarder believes objects may be of use some day in the future and that hoarders avoid throwing away collected objects because it creates such intense stress. She is very intrigued with the topic of hoarding, using words like "interesting" and "fascinating." She is optimistic about being able to intervene in hoarding cases.

### Qualitative Analyses

The qualitative analysis follows the Miles and Huberman (1994) contention that qualitative data analyses is comprised of three components—data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. “Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or transcriptions” while...“a [data] display is an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action” (p. 11). Conclusion drawing and verification involves “noting regularities, patterns, explanations, possible configurations, causal flows, and propositions” which the researcher needs to explore while “maintaining openness and skepticism” (p. 11).

#### *Data Reduction*

Workers provided a total of 973 statements, which were transcribed into Word and coded. Of the total statements, 367 (38%) statements related to acquisition, possessiveness, or discarding, which became the basis for the qualitative analyses. The other statements were classified into the following categories: Living Conditions (13% of all statements); Intervention (10%), Characteristics of Hoarders (9%), General Explanations for Hoarding (6%), Social Interactions by Hoarders (6%), Mental Illness (6%), Adult Protective Services (5%), APS Worker/Client Interaction (5%), Outcomes (3%), Other (3%), and The Community (<1%). These statements were reviewed for trends and to interpret some of the acquisition, possessiveness, and discarding statements.

Focusing only on the 367 statements that related to acquisition, possessiveness, and discarding, a total of 106 (29%) reflected functional characteristics, a total of 24 (7%)

reflected idiosyncratic characteristics, and 7 statements (2%) reflected functional and idiosyncratic characteristics. The majority of the statements (63%) could not be coded as functional or idiosyncratic.

*Acquisition: The Acquiring of Possessions*

Each acquisition statement reflects the subject discussing how, when, or what a hoarder brings into the home, or why the hoarder acquires additional items. Workers often discussed how hoarders would acquire new items by going through trashcans in their neighborhood or buying specifically-sought items from yard sales, flea markets, and consignment shops.

Focusing on just the 367 statements related to acquisition, possessiveness, and discarding (hoarding component statements), acquisition statements were the least frequent, with acquisition statements comprising only 15% of the statements. Eleven of the 56 acquisition statements also discussed possessiveness and one other statement related to both acquisition and discarding. Eliminating the acquisition statements that do not address functionality or idiosyncratic characteristics results in 29 acquisition statements.

Of these 29 statements related to acquisition, 18 (62%) reflected functionality, 10 (34%) reflected idiosyncratic characteristics, and 1 (3%) reflected both functional and idiosyncratic characteristics. Three subjects talked about acquisition in terms of functionality and idiosyncratic characteristics, while two workers (Bob and Emily) talked about acquisition exclusively in terms of how acquiring the items was functional.

Bob discussed one elderly woman who hoarded as having suffered from poverty in her childhood, leading to a compulsion to purchase and collect a large supply of food.

[This woman hoarded] just about everything...containers. Plastic bags. Food.

And I think that hers stems from the fact that she's German and she was a young girl during World War II, I think 13, 14 years old and she lived in Berlin, which was bombed to the ground. They lived off of...the coffee grounds that the rich people threw out and they ate the potato peelings that the rich people peeled off their potatoes...She never had wanted for anything since coming here to the United States when she was a young girl like 22, 23, something, [but] she still hoards stuff. She lives alone and has three refrigerators and a freezer, and they're stuffed full of stuff. And it goes bad. She'll put steaks or pork chops and put them in there and they'll go bad and she'll wind up feeding them to the dogs.

In another one of Bob's cases of elderly women who hoard, the woman scavenged from the landfill and collected potentially useful or repairable items, which Bob attributed to her lower income status. In contrast, deprivation, particularly the connection between surviving the Great Depression and hoarding in later life, was rejected as an explanation for hoarding by Cermele et al. (2001), who found no association between childhood deprivation and hoarding.

APS workers perceive hoarders adding to their collection due to social isolation or loss. One worker said, "Something is missing elsewhere so that emotion, that voided emotion, may be filled with the acquiring of that particular item" (Anne)

He would go shopping and buy all this stuff, and all of this started when his wife passed away...So this is a someone who suffered a lot of loss and then started accumulating things. Same thing with the woman who hoarded animals, basically, she was kind of isolated, alone. She wasn't married, never had been, Mom was gone, living alone (Emily).

The two major themes expressed in acquisition statements related to idiosyncratic characteristics are that hoarding is a compulsion and an addiction. For example, one worker described how a case binge shopped every time he got paid. "He will go and obsessively, when he gets paid, and purchase items I mean maybe 10 bottles of cologne, big bottles of shampoo, and he will do this every payday" (Donna). Other workers described how hoarders need to add to their possessions. "I believe it's close to being able to be an addiction with these items" (Anne).

It satisfies this craving...that's the only way that I can describe it...it's like a craving, and once they get it, it's been taken care of 'til the next time it hits and we're talking about folks with very, very limited incomes...They see this stuff and it's like "Oh my God, I have to have it." (Carol)

The anomaly of acquisition behavior is reinforced by comments by interviewed workers. One worker equated hoarding to an addiction.

I believe it's close to being able to be an addiction with these items...I don't believe people necessarily want to live in filth, and that's what it becomes, to the point where you can't maneuver in your own environment, and it's like a drug

addict, I kind of compare it to. You don't want to be a drug addict, but sometimes the initial attraction is a problem you're going through (Anne).

While Anne generalized about hoarding as an addiction, three other workers talked about hoarders' urge to acquire items only in terms of specific cases.

I had two elderly gentlemen one time... What are those channels that you can buy things on tv that I avoid like the plague? The boxes are never even opened. You know, it's like you walk into their apartment and there's a path, literally, through it, a path from the door to the kitchen, or from the door to the bathroom and, you know, there's very, very valid reasons for having all this stuff, very valid reasons. I think, yeah, I would say it's under the umbrella of the obsessive compulsive, again, this need to possess. They see this stuff and it's like "Oh my God, I have to have it" (Carol.)

Similarly, Donna talked about one man who "...will go and obsessively when he gets paid and purchase items I mean maybe ten bottles of cologne, big bottles of shampoo, and he will do this every payday. Clothes, multiples of clothes. He will blow his whole paycheck on just purchasing items that he already has."

Workers sometimes expressed negativity in discussing how hoarders acquire possessions to add to their collection. "He would collect trash as well--old cereal boxes, old doughnut containers--and they were nasty--because he just felt everything was important" (Anne). However, most of the statements about acquisition suggested that the workers understood how acquiring more items is enjoyable or purposeful to the hoarder.

“For this particular person who's hoarding, it could have been they went shopping and they saw this particular item and purchased it and it made them feel good.” (Anne)

*Possessiveness: The Saving of Objects*

Each possessiveness statement reflects what or why an elderly person maintains a collection of items that on the surface appear to have little or no value. In many cases, subjects discussed the items hoarded, typically newspapers and junk mail, and the meaningfulness of these items to the hoarders' lives.

Of the 93 statements related to possessiveness, 73 (78%) reflected functionality, 16 (17%) reflected idiosyncratic characteristics, and 4 (4%) reflected both functional and idiosyncratic characteristics. While the other workers mentioned possessiveness as both a functional and idiosyncratic characteristic of hoarders, Bob viewed possessiveness in strictly functional terms, as he also perceived acquisition and discarding. In describing one case of a couple with 30 – 40 cats, Bob discussed how the cats not only provided a sense of social contact, but were actually protective.

I recall somebody making the comment that the cats may have even saved the people's lives because they would pile on them and keep them warm...If the cats are giving these people affection, where apparently nobody else in the community is and the children weren't...They're keeping them warm and...they'd love their cats (Bob).

Bob discussed at length another case in which an elderly woman would forage for more items to add to her collection, believing that she will repair and use these items in the future.

She had even the dashboard piled up with things she had picked up and her truck was sagging down in the back. One time I went out there and looked at [the pickup truck] and she had the top off of a well in there...you know the big concrete tops? She would take it home to her modest little trailer home and some things--clothes, newspapers and whatever, she had to keep inside; the lawn chairs and lawnmowers and refrigerators you could put outside. She was always, "Well, this is good, all it needs is just this or that" but it would never get this or that (Bob).

In many instances, workers described how the attachment to possessions was of more importance than the clients' well-being and how the clients were willing to sacrifice their own health and safety to maintain their collection.

I've seen a lot of individuals that would refuse like assisted living or companion services or nursing homes; it's because they didn't want to give up the items...I

have one client and her main concern is "can I take my things with me?" (Donna).

This willingness to sacrifice self-care for possessions was most acutely observed in cases involving animal hoarding, where subjects would describe cases living in squalid conditions with the misguided belief that they were caring for their pets.

In assessing the functionality of hoarded possessions, the main themes derived from the workers are that hoarders are emotionally attached to their possessions because the possessions offer some link to the past, substitute for close social relationships, provide comfort during a stressful transition, symbolize a need for control, provide



opportunity for the hoarder to utilize existing skills, or the hoarding represents an intense fear of future deprivation. Each of these themes are explored.

*Link to the past.* Workers described a variety of items that represented a link to the hoarders' pasts, including figurines, newspapers, and clothing. In one case, Donna described how one elderly woman would narrate stories of her childhood using old clothes as a vehicle to remember past events.

I have one client...I went on an investigation; she had things that she had stored away from when she was a child. I think she wants to hold onto them...to her past. That's what I'm finding. When I met with her, she would reminisce about her childhood, over and over and over again, and relate it to her clothing (Donna).

In another case, Anne talked about how collecting ceramic figurines was reminiscent of her childhood collection.

When we went to her home and asked her why, because her home was cluttered with several items, not just ceramics, to the point you couldn't really move in the home. But the ceramic items were in excess, and for her, it reminded her of her childhood (Anne).

Anne also described an elderly man who hoarded newspapers with the intent to read them and get ideas for future inventions.

He had newspapers throughout the entire home and his concept was "something in those newspapers was worth reading" and he wants to get to each one of those newspapers at some point, but mind you, he was in his eighties and I don't really think that was going to happen. He has a wife as well and the newspapers were

stacked throughout the home to the point they presented a safety hazard to his wife because he stored the papers on the stairs, stacked up, and it really presented a hazard. He felt going through the newspapers or looking through the newspapers would kind of connect him to help develop other ideas... In his mind, there was something in the newspaper that he needs to read that would promote towards his success, or be helpful to him in some sort of way (Anne.)

The newspapers created a severe health and safety risk to his wife, who suffered from dementia, because the stairs were stacked with newspapers. The man was very resistant to having his newspapers organized or discarded, and eventually the wife moved in with her daughter. The case showed how possessions become not only a significant attachment object, but how they can become more important than relationships.

*Substitute for close social relationships.* In the cases described by the APS workers, one common theme is that the hoarders are socially isolated, that they have conflictual relationships with children or spouses, if they have any contact at all, and some of the hoarders have no outside contact. Social deprivation was a common finding for Carol, who has investigated several cases of animal hoarding. "...They're lonely and their animals are their company. 'These [cats] are my babies. They're like my children'" (Carol).

Four of the five APS workers discussed cat hoarding as a means for emotional connection and social contact, or, as Carol indicated, "It's taking care of some need somewhere just to have [the cats]." (The other subject did not mention any animal

hoarding cases). The cases demonstrate that hoarders can be more attached to their possessions than they are to their own health and well-being.

In some cases, hoarders preferred their possessions over the company of others, as with the man whose newspaper collection superseded his relationship to his wife.

Interestingly, one of Anne's cases was a woman who hoarded figurines because they reminded her of her childhood, but she wanted no contact at all with her sister. In a few cases, hoarded possessions permitted positive contact between the hoarder and the APS worker, who may have been the only regular personal contact in the hoarder's week.

Similarly, one of Donna's hoarding cases involved a man whose ex-wife maintained contact so that the hoarder's apartment could have some small measure of organization.

In other cases, relationships functioned to control hoarding, as in one case in which the husband had strict standards about the number of cats his wife could keep, which led to severe cat hoarding after his death.

When I interviewed one of the sons, I said, "Take me back. What was your childhood like?" and she always had the need to have her cats around her. When the father died is when it got out of control (Carol).

*Comfort during a stressful transition.* One worker, Donna, discussed how hoarding provided comfort to clients during stressful situations involving loss. In one case, an elderly couple cluttered their home with an assortment of toys, Christmas decorations, and mail until the caretaking man was hospitalized. His common-law wife, unable to care for herself, was placed in assisted living where she continually clutched an

old radio from their home as a symbol of maintaining ties to their hoarded possessions and ties to her husband.

In another case, Donna described how one family was very concerned about their father when he kept all the belongings of his late wife. While creating health and safety hazards, the belongings created some sense of comfort to the widow long after his wife's death.

He will share his feelings about his loss of his wife and he will get real emotional and I'm trying to get the family to understand, too, that we have to respect his boundaries with her things, too, because those are his things and those were her things (Donna).

Another example of hoarding as a way to comfort oneself involved a case where a woman hoarded books and printed material, which Donna associated with the woman's sudden loss of her mother, son, and daughter during separate incidences close in time. Donna suggested the books provided some enjoyment and comfort to the woman while she grieved significant loss.

*Need for control.* Issues of control were common in statements about possessiveness. In one of Donna's cases, a highly-educated woman hoarded books and documents "to remain in control of her life" (Donna) after a gunshot wound during a domestic dispute left her reliant on a wheelchair for mobility as she continued to live with her abusive husband. The collection allowed the hoarder to exert some power in her dysfunctional relationship and gave her an opportunity to self-educate, an activity that seemed very rewarding to the client.

*Opportunity to utilize existing skills.* Interestingly, the workers never described clients hoarding in order to explore a role that would be new or different to them. Instead, the hoarding provides some consistency to past hobbies or vocations, as with the elderly inventor who scanned newspapers for new invention ideas or the woman who searched through the landfill to find objects she could repair. While this theme was less developed than the other possessiveness themes, it offers another plausible explanation for why hoarders save objects.

*Fear of future deprivation.* Workers frequently discussed hoarding as being fear-based. In the case of possessiveness, the fear is often that they will need that item in the future, so they are reluctant to throw away most objects. This was the explanation that Emily offered when discussing one elderly woman who kept old documents from a court case that she was involved in years ago; Emily felt the client was preparing herself in the event she would need to go to court again. Fear of future deprivation could explain much of food hoarding, particularly when “You've seen people with jars and jars of canned food because of some time where they've been without a job for a lot of years” (Emily).

Fear of future deprivation was also the explanation subjects provided in explaining why one hoarder kept enormous supplies of shampoo and soap and why another hoarder collected so many boxes and jars of food that they were overflowing from cabinets and were stacked on his dining room table. In some cases, the subjects suggested childhood experiences paved the way for fearing future deprivation and eventual hoarding, as with the following statements by two subjects.

Some of the people that we work with grew up in the Depression era, so, again, hoarding is done because of the Depression era they grew up in. “My Mom, my Dad didn't have enough sugar or they didn't have enough clothes or shoes, so I'm going to make sure I always have enough” (Anne).

I'm sure that the environment that they grew up on has an impact. I know if you see your parents keeping everything, you're taught, you know "Don't throw that piece of string away; you could use it someday” (Bob)

### *Idiosyncratic Characteristics*

Workers discussed how hoarders have idiosyncratic characteristics that drive their need to save and maintain their hoarded collections. Workers typically made statements about idiosyncratic characteristics in terms of possible mental illness, as in Carol's statement that “No one in their right mind would want to live like that.”

Workers often discussed animal hoarding as being a manifestation of mental illness. Carol talked about how the reality of the living conditions is often in polar contrast to the animal hoarders' belief that they are providing care to animals. “There's a huge disconnect between what the reality of the conditions are and their perception of it,” she remarked about animal hoarders, particularly one case in which the elderly hoarder lived in squalor among her 95 cats.

She was actually living out of her car because they [the cats] had taken the house over...Therein lies the disconnect. They're not taking care of them [the cats]. They're thinking they are, but they're not (Carol).

Donna noted that hoarders are overly vigilant in maintaining ownership, suggesting an intense fear of loss. “She's very protective of her things; some paranoia is going on there,” suggested Donna about a woman who hoarded books and documents. This perspective was shared by Emily, who said, “So definitely that paranoia is there; that I will say is clear cut in all the cases that I have seen.”

*Discarding: The Reluctance to Throw Away Possessions*

Each reluctance to discard statement relates to the subjects discussing the hoarders' concern, reluctance, inability, or resultant condition involved in throwing away items hoarded. In many cases, the subjects discussed the process of engaging the hoarder in discarding, the emotions the hoarder expressed, and the condition of living conditions after the home had been cleared of clutter.

Of the 25 statements related to discarding possessions, 20 (80%) reflected functionality, 2 (8%) reflected idiosyncratic characteristics, and 3 (12%) reflected both functional and idiosyncratic characteristics. Workers were more likely to indicate that discarding involves both functional and idiosyncratic components than when they're discussing acquisition or possessiveness.

In terms of the functionality of hoarding, the most common themes presented by the workers are that discarding represents an emotional loss and lack of control, and that discarding triggers anxiety about future deprivation. When discussing acquisition or possessiveness, workers typically spoke about clients having neutral affect or the hoarders enjoying their possessions, as when workers talked about animal hoarders enjoying the companionship of their pets. In contrast, discarding statements were very

often linked with descriptions of how angry, upset, saddened, hurt, or fearful clients became. “They feel as if you're taking something personal away from them, something within, and for her, she lashed out in tears and she would walk away” explained Anne.

All four of the female subjects talked about the emotional impact involved in discarding. In one case, the worker had to place an elderly woman with mental retardation and mobility problems into an assisted living facility where she would be without her hoarded collection of toys and coloring books. She talked about how the loss of possessions was more upsetting to the client than being placed in institutional care.

I talked to the facility about letting her hoard to some extent, like a small collection of whatever, but they keep throwing it out and throwing it out and throwing it out, and she gets sadder and sadder and sadder (Emily).

Workers, particularly Anne, explained that clients are anxious and emotional when their possessions are discarded, but involving the client in making discarding decisions helps create a more positive outcome.

I've always involved the person with whatever discarding needed to take place. That's always the initial process, and then to get them to organize what needs to stay and what needs to go, and then you kind of have to go through the piles that you've developed and kind of work with them. It can be a lengthy process (Anne).

All of the female subjects found that subjects feel anxiety during the process of discarding, and sometimes even when the issue of discarding is originally presented. For example, in Carol's cat hoarding case, she remarked that “There was anxiety associated



with it” and Donna said, “They feel a sense that if they throw something away, that they might throw away something very important.” Similarly, Emily talked about one case in which a man started hoarding from the point in time in which someone had inadvertently thrown out a stock certificate.

Several years ago, like 20 years ago, somebody was helping them clean out whatever and threw out a stock certificate and ever since that day, he's thrown nothing away. So a year, 20 years later, here's a house you can hardly walk through (Emily).

Emily, who often associated hoarding with the issue of fear, noted that holding onto possessions is almost superstitious—that the clutching of possessions prevents future problems. “It's the same thing--if I throw this out, something's going to happen and someone is going to need it” (Emily).

The first lady I talked to you about...was involved in several lawsuits at one point in time and you know you have to keep very careful documentation and records when you're involved in a lawsuit, and that just seemed to have turned into where she keeps everything. She throws nothing out. She takes notes about everything, any transaction, any conversation and she has notebook after notebook. There were a lot of notebooks in her trailer. All these notebooks she's taken all these decades. So it was that fear, you know, “I don't want to throw something out because I might need it” (Emily).

Workers also talked about how discarding represents losing control over one's life. In one case, Anne associated “things being thrown away, people taking over.” As

many of the hoarding cases have health issues, it's as though the hoarder identifies with her possessions, that she needs to care vigilantly for her possessions because, in fact, she herself needs care. By asserting some control over the disposition of possessions, the hoarder is able to maintain some small semblance of control over her own life.

“Between that [discarding] and, I think, getting old, not being able to do many of the things he used to be able to do, so he felt throwing those things away was somewhat taking away his manhood” (Anne).

While workers talk about discarding in terms of emotional impact, loss of control and anxiety, they also suggested that some clients recognize that their homes need organization, even if they are unable or unwilling to do the organization themselves. Anne talked about one case, an elderly man who hoarded newspapers, who seemed to understand the need for decluttering but would never allow or participate in throwing out hoarded objects. He avoided the issue of throwing out the newspapers. “The conversation was redirected back to what was originally on the table. He would say, ‘Well, I'll get to it. I'll get to it’” said Anne. Similarly, Bob found that hoarders are sometimes cognizant of the need to organize their homes.

I've heard people that hoard but did not reach the extent where it reached their everyday life would tell you that "I know I need to clean this up" or "I know I've saved too much stuff, but I know the minute I get rid of it, I'm going to use it or there's going to have a need for it" (Bob)

While workers described hoarders acquiring and possessing objects using mental health explanations, they tended to be less descriptive when discussing idiosyncratic

characteristics involved in discarding. The reasons for hoarders' reluctance to discard seemed vague and elusive to workers, though the reasons for collecting and saving seemed a lot more clear to workers. This vagueness is communicated in statements about how the issue of discarding is not about an inability to make decisions so much as it is about inability to follow through.

Even if they decide okay, I can get rid of this now, when push comes to shove, they can't do it, even if they made the decision to do it, they just can't do it. They do seem able to say "Yeah, I can throw this out," but to actually throwing it in the dumpster, there's like this invisible wall that holds them back (Emily).

### *Overall Hoarding*

In addition to discussing hoarding within the components of acquisition, possessiveness, and discarding, workers discussed general overall hoarding. Reviewing these statements highlights how explanations for hoarding are often case-specific. In some cases, for example, the workers explained that the hoarding links the clients to their past, but in another case, "I say, 'Well do you have anything of sentimental value in there?' and she tells me 'No'" (Donna.) Similarly, workers discussed hoarding as a reaction to grief and loss, but both Anne and Donna indicated that hoarding is sometimes a lifestyle choice.

Some of the clients that I see that are hoarding I don't think that it's something that they just develop. For some of my clients, it's always been the way they've been living; it's their lifestyle (Donna).

Bob, Donna, and Emily indicated that hoarding is multi-dimensional. “I would expect that there are different motivations [for hoarding] for different people” said Bob. “There doesn't seem to be one factor,” said Emily.

I think it's multiple dynamics that play a part of the hoarding, for me. I've seen it could be a sense of longing, being in control, dealing with grief and depression, mental health (Donna).

In terms of identifying the multiple dimensions of hoarding, the two most common themes are that the object itself is considered important or the object represents a void, with workers typically talking about both themes within each case discussed.

Two workers, Emily and Anne, had theories about general hoarding that were valid. Anne theorized that hoarding was related to emotional attachment and Emily theorized that hoarding is fear-based.

I find it starts at an early age, actually, but the hoarding with seniors just relates to some attachment. A lot of the things they collect either remind them of family members or heirlooms from generations in the family or things that they have attached to and relate to something in the family or someone special to them (Anne).

Emily discussed how hoarding is fear-based, which manifests itself by hoarders having deep anxiety about throwing things away and which underlie anxiety disorders found among hoarding clients, particularly obsessive compulsive disorder. This perspective has a lot of merit and explains the hoarder's strong reluctance to throw away items. It also explains animal hoarding, though animal hoarders seem quick to declare

how much they love their animals. While proclaiming that they love their pets, animal hoarders are not caring for their animals, nurturing them or loving their pets, but are really more invested in maintaining the animals and keeping them from outside interference. This concept can be demonstrated in Carol's case in which a woman slept in her car because her cats had taken over the house. Though the woman declared her love for these cats, calling them "her babies," and refusing to surrender the cats to her family or animal control, she obviously lived in fear of the 95 cats, who were feral and uncontrollable.

#### *Data Display*

Focusing on just the 367 statements related to acquisition, possessiveness, and discarding (hoarding component statements), workers discussed possessiveness the most frequently (66% of the statements). Two of the 241 possessiveness statements also discussed acquisition and two other statements related to both possessiveness and discarding. Eliminating the possessiveness statements that do not address functionality or idiosyncratic characteristics results in 93 possessiveness statements.

Of the 367 statements related to acquisition, possessiveness, and discarding (hoarding component statements), workers discussed discarding in 26% of the statements. Thirteen of the 95 discarding statements also discussed possessiveness and one other statement related to both acquisition and discarding. Eliminating the discarding statements that do not address functionality or idiosyncratic characteristics results in 25 discarding statements.

As illustrated in Table 11, subjects typically talked about discarding much more often than acquisition or possessiveness. The discarding statements related to functional purposes of hoarding more often than idiosyncratic purposes.

In comparison to the possessiveness and discarding, the other components of hoarding, workers discussed functionality much less often when talking about acquiring items and focused more on idiosyncratic characteristics. Table 11 reflects how workers perceive acquiring items more often due to idiosyncratic characteristics than functional purposes. In contrast to only 17% of the possessiveness statements and 8% of the discarding statements, a high 34% of the acquisition statements relate to idiosyncratic characteristics.

#### *Conclusion Drawing*

While the data reduction and data display analyses decomposed subject interviews into common themes and elements to permit cross-subject comparisons, the conclusion drawing analyses follows Miles's and Huberman's (1994) recommendation to "avoid aggregation," "preserve case configurations" to "see the whole picture," "inquire into deviant case," and "look for typologies" that "...are not simplistic, on the basis of a single variable...but have similar configurations" (p. 208). In this way, the subjects' accounts of the hoarders are presented to look at the hoarding cases as individual persons. In the interviews with the adult protective services (APS) workers, the workers discussed a total of 17 different cases. In all cases except one (a recent case of Emily's), the worker offered explanations for why the person hoards. Diagram 1 shows the 18 different explanations APS workers mentioned to describe why people hoard. The explanations

are both functional (sentimentality, enjoyment) and idiosyncratic (obsessive compulsive disorder, paranoia). The workers typically provided at least three explanations for each case, with a range of one to seven explanations for each case. Each of these explanations demonstrates why a worker thinks a person might hoard, but they could also reflect the result of hoarding, too. For example, workers often discussed social isolation as a reason some cases hoard, but social isolation might also be a result of the hoarding behavior.

Figure 3 illustrates that the most common case explanations for hoarding are emotional attachment/enjoyment (seven cases), compensate for conflictual relationships (six cases), fear of making mistakes (four cases), maintain control over life (four cases), and mental illness (four cases). Lifestyle choice was not an explanation for any specific case, but one worker related lifestyle choices to overall hoarding cases.

Figure 4 illustrates the general explanations workers shared about why people hoard. This diagram reflects workers' statements about hoarding when the statements do not refer to specific cases. The workers provided both several and varied explanations for hoarding.

There was little agreement on explanations for overall hoarding. Three workers stated addiction/dependence explained overall hoarding, but all of the other explanations were stated by only one or two workers. Interestingly, while nearly all of the workers said that conflictual relationships contributed to the hoarding of at least one of their cases, none of the workers talked about conflictual relationships leading to hoarding in general.

Table 11.

*Hoarding Component Statements*


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	<u>Acquisition</u>		<u>Possessiveness</u>		<u>Discarding</u>		<u>Total</u>	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Functional	18	62%	73	78%	20	80%	111	76%
Idiosyncratic	10	34%	16	17%	2	8%	28	19%
Both	<u>1</u>	<u>3%</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4%</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>12%</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>5%</u>
Total	29	100%	93	100%	25	100%	147	100%
Row Total	29	20%	93	63%	25	17%	147	100%

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Figure 3. Explanations for Hoarding, by Worker and Case

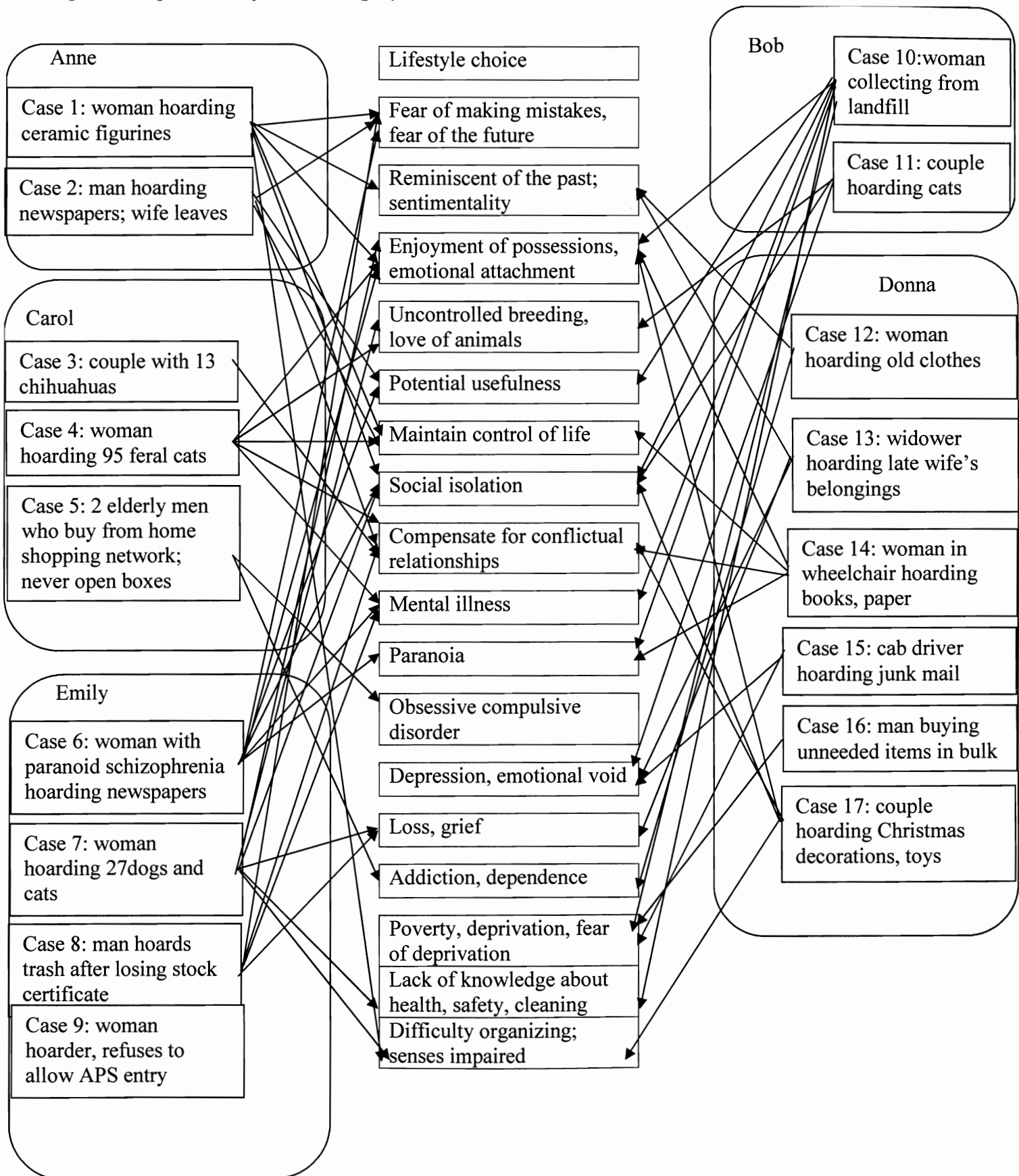
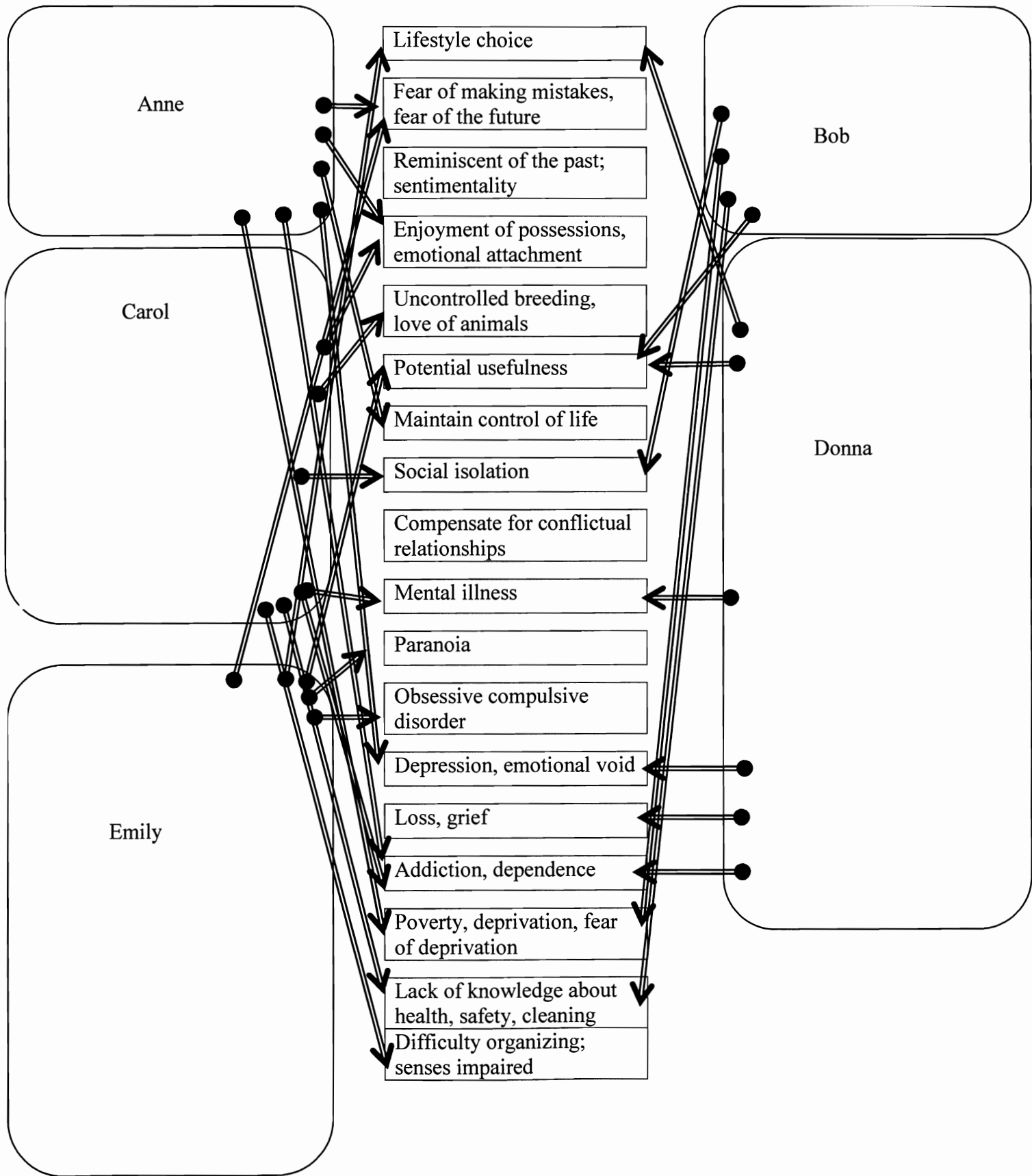


Figure 4. *Workers' General Explanations for Hoarding*



## DISCUSSION

The research study utilized a mixed-methods approach involving adult protective services workers completing a survey and interviews of five workers. The findings corroborate other studies that find that belief systems underlie hoarding behaviors, particularly how hoarders' possessions provide comfort and security; possessions are considered functional, valuable, irreplaceable; and that the owner is responsible for maintaining control over possessions.

The research also explored the extent to which hoarding is based on idiosyncratic characteristics of hoarding elderly women, beliefs in the functionality of hoarding, and the interconnected acquisition, possessiveness, and reluctance to discard components of hoarding. This section examines the following conclusions and how they were drawn.

1. Idiosyncratic characteristics of hoarding elderly women contribute to hoarding behavior.
2. Hoarding elderly women acquire, save, and are reluctant to dispose of hoarded possessions because the objects serve an important purpose or function in the women's lives.
3. Acquisition, possessiveness, and reluctance to discard are major components that explain hoarding behavior.

Additionally, this section examines the strengths and limitations of the research and discusses the implications for social work and future research.

### Idiosyncratic Characteristics

Studies by Cermele et al. (2001), Frost and Hartl (1996), Frost, et al. (1998), Greenberg et al.(1990), Saxena and Maidment (2004), and Stein (1993) found that hoarding can be symptomatic of mental illnesses, particularly obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), as well as Alzheimer's, attachment disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, anorexia, schizophrenia, psychoses, and other disorders. At the same time, hoarding is distinguishable from OCD in a number of ways, including the finding that hoarders are much more strongly emotionally attached to their possessions than are non-hoarding individuals with OCD (Frost et al., 1995) and that hoarders do not respond effectively to medication and talking therapy (Saxena & Maidment, 2004; Steketee & Frost, 2003; Wilhelm et al., 2004). Despite how hoarding can be a symptom of mental illness, there is little evidence that hoarders necessarily have a mental illness. Studies by Ball et. al (1996), Cooney and Hamid (1995), Cornwall (1981), Frost et al. (1995), Greenberg (1987), Vostanis and Dean (1992) found that hoarding behaviors were not significantly contributable or correlated to depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, or psychosis.

Despite the literature review findings of a weak connection between mental illness and hoarding, nearly all (91%) of the workers identified the most recent hoarding case as having a mental illness or cognitive dysfunction, typically obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, dementia, other confusion/disorientation, or memory loss, and typically having two or more disorders. In discussions with the Adult Protective Services

workers, they frequently alluded to some type of mental illness, though were vague about the type of mental illness.

In all, about half (51%) of the cases indicated some type of cognitive disorder—either dementia, memory loss, or some other confusion or disorientation. The vast majority of the workers noted that hoarding elderly women have cognitive difficulty evaluating usefulness and uselessness of objects (97% of workers agreeing) and that they cannot decide what to throw away (93%). Similarly, the majority of workers felt that hoarders having difficulty making decisions (78%) and hoarders not being able decide what to throw away (88%) provide sound or very sound explanations for hoarding.

#### *Discrepancy Between Literature Review Findings and Research Results*

The reason for the discrepancy between the literature review and the research study about the link between mental illness/cognitive dysfunction may be attributable to (a) APS workers' lack of experience, knowledge, and/or skill in assessing mental illness and cognitive dysfunction; (b) hoarders seen by APS workers in Virginia present more symptoms of mental illness/cognitive dysfunction than the hoarders studied in the literature review; and (c) the survey is biased in that it requests the worker to ascertain the types of mental illness/cognitive dysfunction present in recent hoarding cases. Each of these reasons is explored in order to determine why the findings of the research study differ from the literature review findings.

Because APS workers in Virginia investigate only persons who are incapacitated or are elderly, workers are potentially more assuming of mental illness/cognitive dysfunction as well as being exceptionally attentive to symptoms of incapacity. Along

the same line, APS workers may conduct investigations with the preconceived notion that only a person with a mental illness would hoard. The quantitative analyses demonstrated that workers typically investigate the most extreme cases of hoarding, typically with vermin, trash, and extreme clutter present. The worker may reach the conclusion, then, like Carol did, that “nobody in their right mind would live like this.” In an effort to understand the dynamics of hoarding, APS workers may lean towards a medical model, thereby being quick to form a preliminary diagnosis before being able to make or arrange a thorough assessment.

Another distinct possibility for the discrepancy in findings is that the hoarders seen by APS workers are less functional and present more symptoms of anti-social behavior the hoarders studied in published research. Because the research study hoarders are volunteers, it could be surmised that if they have capacity to provide informed consent, then they are at least somewhat insightful enough into their hoarding behavior to recognize that they are accumulating massive amounts of possessions, and that their hoarding behavior has not escalated to the point that community intervention is warranted. In fact, one of the seminal research studies on hoarding in the community involved college students in a small, upper middle class college town in which advertisements to recruit hoarders asked for “packrats,” presumably a very different population than the individuals seen by APS workers during investigations of self-neglect. Similarly, hoarders in the community may have been self-managing mental illness or cognitive disorders for such an extended period of time and in such isolation

from community intervention that their health and mental health are more deteriorated than that of the research volunteers.

Another issue is that the survey requested that the workers identify mental illness and cognitive dysfunction categories that describe their most recent hoarding case. The process of considering the hoarding case within this context may have inadvertently prompted workers to make an immediate and incomplete evaluation of the hoarder's mental and cognitive health.

When discussing their cases of hoarding, the five workers interviewed were vague about diagnoses of the hoarders, but would generalize broadly. For example, Carol talked often about the “disconnect” between reality and animal hoarders' belief that they were providing love and sufficient care to the animals, which she concluded demonstrated a “mental ailment.” The implication is that the workers did not know what kind of mental illness or dysfunction the hoarder had, but they were convinced that incapacity existed.

Despite workers nearly universally indicating mental illness or cognitive disorders among hoarders, they do not prescribe a mental health intervention strategy. In fact, only 59% of the workers recommended psychiatric treatment for addressing the needs of hoarders, much less than the recommendations for collaborative problem-solving (98%) or gentle persuasion (70%).

While APS workers indicate that hoarders typically have a mental illness and/or cognitive disorder, their comments and responses suggest that this only partially explains hoarding behavior. Statements made in the interviews, for example, only rarely

mentioned mental illness as contributing to hoarding; i.e., a total of 28 (19%) statements related to mental illness or cognitive dysfunction, and 8 (5%) other statements related to both idiosyncratic characteristics and functional purposes. Instead, APS workers were more likely to discuss hoarding as serving a purpose or being based on a need or fear.

### Functionalism Theory and Results of Study

The results of the study demonstrated support for functionalism theory as one explanation, though the findings can also demonstrate support for other theories, particularly feminist theory, symbolic interactionism, and exchange theory. The ways in which functionalism provides an understanding of hoarding among elderly women is apparent through the three elements of hoarding as well as providing an overall explanation and treatment model.

#### *Functionalism and Acquisition*

In a consumerist, materialistic society like the United States, the relentless need to acquire more possessions is functional. The unremitting need to buy more and more objects feeds the economy that is based on convincing consumers to acquire things that they really do not need. That elderly women are acquiring massive amounts of broken and discarded objects demonstrates that this lesson is well-learned and that they have incorporated a major social message into their everyday lives.

Elderly women who live alone are one of the most impoverished sub-populations in the country. Those who have never married are even more likely to be impoverished as they are not able to subsist on a late husband's pension, life insurance, or assets. It is no surprise, then, that the population who comes to the attention of adult protective



services for hoarding issues tends to be elderly women who live alone. Because they have limited incomes, their need to acquire more objects is illustrated by their accumulation of free and inexpensive items—newspapers, broken objects, catalogs, abandoned animals, discarded clothing, and giveaways. The impoverished elderly woman, then, is trapped in a frustrating paradox in which she has absorbed the cultural message to acquire more and more possessions and yet she does not have the financial means.

The cultural message to continually acquire new possessions keeps the capitalist economy strong and stable. Every segment of the population—the young and the old, the poor and the wealthy, men and women, all races and religions—support this message with an unrelenting fervor to accumulate, to the point that consumers buy objects they cannot afford or even use. Like other Americans, hoarders are bombarded daily by the message that acquisition of certain objects will improve their lives and increase their social status. Hoarders serve a function to society because they exemplify and perpetuate the cultural message to acquire more possessions at all cost. While hoarding behavior was found in many other countries, it would be interesting to study compulsive buying, what objects are coveted, and the extent of hoarding in other countries, particularly socialist countries where the marketplace and advertising are limited.

Another point in supporting Functionalism is that hoarders accumulate items of social value; the element of acquisition is socially-proscribed, not a deviant or aberrant individualistic behavior. Animals collected by animal hoarders, for example, are almost always the types of animals that are most cherished in this country—cats and dogs.

While the hoarder is unable to care for her large collection of animals, her intent to care for abandoned and mistreated animals is benevolent. The hoarder serves a function, then, in acquiring pets that other people cannot maintain and in being emotionally attached to society's most valued domestic animals.

The major theme in the acquisition of items has to do with social isolation, loss, and addiction.

### *Functionalism and Possessiveness*

Functionalist theory is also supported by examining the ways in which hoarding involves a compelling need to save possessions. Hoarders and non-hoarders save objects long past any usefulness has passed, as demonstrated in hoarders and non-hoarders alike saving clothes that are never worn.

Everybody owns possessions. Except for one recently-discovered, socially-isolated tribe, people universally have a fundamental need to own objects. The ownership permits control over inanimate objects, allows for personal expression and self-identity, and offers aesthetic richness to one's life. In the same way, hoarding demonstrates this zealous attachment to possessions, which is commonly expressed as an emotional attachment.

In this case, hoarding is functional to society in that possessions can offer what society has failed at—the nurturing and care of elderly women who live alone. Possessions can replace people. Society benefits from this exchange because it does not have to scrutinize its laws and attitudes towards elderly women and find ways to be more compassionate. Instead, it can continue to marginalize a segment of society that

seemingly offers little in exchange, and can continue to glorify the young, the male, and the married, one of the wealthiest and therefore most venerated sub-populations. The valuing of those who earn the most and the de-valuing of those who earn the least keeps the American culture firmly entrenched in a consumer-driven capitalistic economy. Compassion costs money and time. The supplanting of possessions for compassion maintains social order, social roles, and the current system of social status.

*Functionalism and the Reluctance to Discard*

While exploring Functionalism theory through acquisition and possessiveness elements shows how hoarding is functional to society, the reluctance to discard is more illustrative of how hoarding is deviant, but this deviance is purposeful. While the compelling need to acquire and keep possessions is socially-proscribed, there is much greater social acceptance for waste than for a reluctance to throw away objects. The cultural message is to replace even useable and valuable objects for newer and therefore seemingly more valuable objects. In contrast, hoarders universally cling to worn out and unusable objects.

Hoarders' refusal to dispose of possessions is functional in that society can justify its ageist, sexist policies governing hoarding cases, and society can continue to marginalize elderly women who live alone. Furthermore, society needs members who exhibit deviant behaviors like hoarding in order to unite together in setting standards about ownership, rights, and cleanliness. Deviance allows other members to feel, "I'm not the worse." Hoarders are needed to some extent so that other members of society can

extend judgment and excuse their own clutter, their lack of compassion, and their own deviant behavior.

### *Functionalism to Explain Hoarding Behavior*

Functionalism was an applicable theory with which to study hoarding because it allowed for a perspective that could show how there is little difference between hoarders and non-hoarders. The theory also allowed for greater insight into how hoarding behavior is purposeful and how hoarding places elderly women who live alone in a low social stratum. Functionalism was also useful in examining the extent to which hoarding is functional to the individual as well as to society.

On the other hand, Functionalism is limited in explaining hoarding behavior of individuals. The theory does not explain adequately why some elderly women hoard and others do not, nor does it account for the men and younger women who hoard. Other theoretical concepts, particularly from personality theories and psychological theories, need to augment Functionalism to provide greater breadth of understanding hoarding behavior.

### Functionality of Possessions

The way in which hoarding is functional is explored within the concepts presented in the literature review—hoarding as a self-neglect behavior within a behavioral theory context, belief systems, instinct, and meanings of possessions. Attachment to possessions is discussed in the next section on acquisition, possessiveness, and reluctance to discard.

*Hoarding as Self-Neglecting Behavior*

Papadopoulos and LaFontaine (2000) suggested that abuse and neglect are functional as (a) a means of social control; (b) a means of communication; (c) a means of reducing stress and frustration; (d) a way of resolving inner conflict; and (e) a form of exploitation for personal gain, thereby offering a model for explaining hoarding as an indicator of neglecting oneself. However, the results of the mixed methods study of APS workers suggests that this model is limited in explaining hoarding behavior as an element of self-neglecting behavior.

*A Means of Social Control*

Despite news articles and some research studies that suggest that hoarding elderly women are socially isolated, findings from this research study demonstrate that hoarders cannot be so easily stereotyped, as they fall in a continuum from socially withdrawn to socially active. On one end of the continuum, a worker talked about an elderly man who accepted his wife and step-daughter moving out of his cluttered house so they could no longer confront him about the stacks of newspapers he collected. Another worker discussed how an elderly woman hoarded objects that reminded her of her childhood family, yet was extremely adamant that her sister keep her distance. On the other end of the continuum, workers described many hoarders who have frequent contact with children, live with spouses, or are actively involved in church or community activities. One worker talked about an elderly couple in which the man would contribute to the wife's hoarding by buying more and more objects that would appeal to his wife, such as dolls and coloring books, which extensively cluttered the house.

More than any other item on the survey, APS workers considered hoarding in order to prevent social contact as the least sound explanation for hoarding behavior. While workers discussed some hoarders as being socially isolated, many hoarders seem to enjoy social contact and even the minimal contact provided by the adult protective services staff. The workers interviewed talked about being able to engage some of the women who showed hoarding behaviors, implying that these women had social skills, enjoyed social contact, and appreciated the worker-client relationship.

*A Means of Communication and Resolving Inner Conflict*

Because hoarding is most prevalent among elderly women, the study examined the connection between hoarding and discrimination, i.e., ageism and sexism. Similarly, the study explored the extent to which elderly women compensate through hoarding for a lack of control over their financial, health, and social situation.

Results of the study found that APS workers do not perceive powerlessness, ageism, or sexism as contributing to a general explanation about hoarding, and there was no significant difference between men and women APS workers in their scores. However, workers frequently discussed the observation that some of their hoarding cases had tumultuous lives and the need to maintain control over one's life was provided as an explanation for five different cases of hoarding. In other words, while powerlessness may be a factor in the lives of hoarding elderly women, it was not considered a viable concept in explaining hoarding in general.

*A Means of Reducing Stress and Frustration*

Though empirical evidence does not support a correlation between stress and hoarding, several hoarding researchers (Clark, et al., 1975; Frost et al., 1995; Vostanis & Dean 1992) have suggested a connection. In this study, only about one-third of the workers felt that a good explanation for hoarding was that hoarding allows individuals to numb out negative feelings or reduce stress.

While stress may not explain hoarding in general, workers often discussed cases in which hoarders suffered from stressful situation such as poverty, conflictual relationships, and loss. In fact, the most common theme to explain individual hoarding behavior was conflictual relationships, with six of the 17 hoarding cases indicating turbulent relationships. One of the most notable examples of an elderly woman who was hoarding due to stress, conflictual relationships, and a sense of powerlessness was a quadriplegic woman who was shot in a domestic violence situation, still lived with her abusive husband, and who recently lost her son, daughter, and mother. The worker suggested that her extensive hoarding of books, papers, and documents helped the woman achieve some sense of control and comfort in her chaotic and turbulent life.

*A Form of Exploitation for Personal Gain*

While the section on acquisition will demonstrate the extensive need and pleasure hoarders derive from acquiring more items, there was little indication in the survey and interview results that hoarding was exploitative for personal gain. Instead, the results emphasized the need for control and an enjoyment of possessions, not a need to manipulate or receive secondary gains.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the abuse and neglect model developed by Papadopoulos and LaFontaine (2000) is limited in its application to hoarding as a self-neglecting behavior. However, the model was useful for studying hoarding because it allowed the opportunity to move beyond stereotypes and assumptions. Applying the model to hoarding behavior demonstrated that some common perceptions of hoarders, such as their social isolation, are only myths and that characteristics of hoarders are just as varied as characteristics of all elderly women.

### *Belief Systems*

Hoarding is functional to elderly women because the behavior epitomizes some core beliefs. Beliefs that are common among hoarders, as observed by APS workers, include the beliefs that hoarded possessions (a) provide comfort and security, (b) are the responsibility of the hoarder, and (c) are useful, functional, valuable, and irreplaceable. Each of these beliefs is explored.

#### *Possessions Provide Comfort and Security*

APS workers indicated that one of the most sound explanations for hoarding among elderly women was that hoarded objects provide a sense of comfort and safety, and nearly all workers agree that hoarders feel a sense of comfort with their hoarded possessions. In one of Donna's cases, for example, an elderly woman who was involuntarily admitted to a psychiatric hospital and had hoarded toys, Christmas ornaments, and dolls, found solace by clinging onto an old radio. Like the possessions she hoarded in her home, this radio became a tangible symbol of security and comfort



and therefore essential in her ability to cope with her new environment. APS workers reported that hoarders really love the possessions they collect and this attachment offers a general explanation for why some elderly women hoard.

Similarly, the process of adding items to their hoarded collections provides some level of comfort. Although hoarders may rarely use or interact with their hoarded collection, both the literature and the study findings indicate that they feel the most content by simply being in proximity to their possessions. Because their possessions provide comfort and safety, hoarders feel intensely violated when their objects are discarded, as demonstrated by the fact that nearly all workers agreed that “the thought of throwing away hoarded object creates a lot of distress for the hoarder.”

By refusing to throw away items in their collection, hoarders maintain the comfort provided by possessions while forestalling the objectionable task of deciding the worth of each item. Workers reported a high level of agreement about hoarders having great difficulty evaluating what objects are useful and what objects are useless, as well a high level of agreement about how hoarders cannot decide what objects to throw away and what objects to keep.

#### *Possessions are the Responsibility of the Hoarder*

Nearly all of APS workers agree that hoarders feel they must maintain control over their possessions, mirroring the findings by Frost et al. (1995) that hoarders feel an exaggerated sense of responsibility. The Frost study found that individuals who scored high on the 22-item Hoarding Scale also scored high on tests measuring a sense of

responsibility for possessions and they felt that they alone were responsible for the maintenance and well-being of possessions.

Hyper-responsibility was most clearly demonstrated in workers' accounts of animal hoarding. The hoarders expressed an obligation to take care of animals, even though they may have been physically, financially, or emotionally poorly equipped to handle multiple animals. As a result, APS workers uncovered squalid and hazardous living situations because of the individuals' reluctance to give away the animals, coupled with their perceived duty to house the animals. In some cases, the animal hoarder will allow animals to be surrendered, but this is rare.

*Objects are Useful, Functional, Valuable, and Irreplaceable*

The vast majority of APS workers indicated that hoarders collect and save objects because hoarders see the objects as being useful, functional, valuable, and irreplaceable, and nearly all workers agreed that hoarders keep objects because they may be of use some day. Hoarded objects may be of use some day in the future was considered a plausible explanation for hoarding, with 78% indicating it was a sound explanation. The finding validates the work of Frost and Hartl (1996) and other studies that found that hoarders notice some value in objects that may elude most other people.

*Instinct*

Research on the innate need to collect objects, particularly the research by Csikszentmihayli and Rochberg-Holton (1981), demonstrate that hoarders and non-hoarders alike enjoy ownership and possession of objects that others may deem useless or worthless. This pleasure was reiterated through survey results in which the majority of

APS workers agreed that hoarders enjoy bringing more and more objects into their homes and that hoarders are strongly emotionally attached to their possessions.

All the workers interviewed had examples of individuals who expressed an intense pleasure in their hoarded possessions, although some hoarders seem to imply a certain level of enslavement by the objects they collected. The hoarders that workers most frequently identified as enjoying their collections were those individuals who amassed large numbers of animals.

### *Meanings of Possessions*

To coincide with the literature review, this section will study private and public meanings of possessions, the maintenance of self-identity, and the special relationship of elderly women and their possessions. Similar to the research cited in the literature review, this section will demonstrate that like non-hoarders, elderly women who hoard are demonstrating private and public symbolism of possession ownership, are preserving self-identity through their choice and representation of possessions, and that hoarding exemplifies a particularly strong emotional attachment between elderly women and their possessions.

### *Private Meanings of Possessions*

Like people throughout the world, hoarders collect and save objects because the objects represent other times and places, as well as an expression of the self. As Belk (1992) notes, "Possessions...provide us with a sense of mastery, a sense of self, and sense of past" (p. 52). While non-hoarders tend to value and collect objects that have clear sentimental, religious, or historical significance, objects valued and collected by

hoarders are deeply personal. This deeply personal meaningfulness of possessions was exemplified by Anne's account of an elderly woman who collected ceramic statues because they reminded her of childhood memories.

As another worker noted, hoarders' need to remember the past may be so strong that it is manifested in zealously maintaining possessions. One worker described a family who were concerned about their elderly father who maintained the house exactly as it was when his wife died, including keeping all of her possessions and not changing the sheets.

#### *Public Meanings of Possessions*

While private meanings of possessions refer to the experiences, events, and times represented by objects as ascribed by the owner, public meanings are culturally and socially ascribed. In a country that values consumerism, communication, and information, then, it is not surprising that the most commonly hoarded objects are newspapers, magazines, and catalogs. The study's finding of a high frequency of hoarding printed materials duplicates findings in other studies of printed materials being the most commonly hoarded items (Frost & Gross, 1993; Frost & Hartl, 1996; Frost, et al., 1998; Frost et al., 2000; Steketee et al., 2001).

Similarly, workers often talked about cases in which individuals adopted stray animals out of a sense of social conscience, indicating that the hoarding originated from the cultural value of domestic animals. The animal hoarding cases in both this study as well as in the literature (Arluke, et al., 2002; Patronek, 1999) found that the animals collected by hoarders were the animals most collected by non-hoarders—cats and dogs.

While starting out as a benevolent gesture, the situation deteriorated when the animals bred indiscriminately or the owner was physically and financially unable to manage the large number. The choice of objects hoarded, then, not only demonstrates what is important to the hoarder, they represent what is important in society.

### *Self-identity*

Writings by Belk (1988), Csikszentmihayli and Rochberg-Holton (1981) and Price et al. (2000), among others, contend that the self is expressed through possession ownership and that self-identity is both developed and maintained through possessions. The research study demonstrated evidence of the relationship between self-identity and possessions when nearly all workers agreed that possessions feel like extensions of the hoarder's identity.

Similarly, the removal of possessions, especially when the removal is involuntary, is akin to losing one's identity. Nearly all workers agreed that to hoarders, discarding items feels like losing part of the self and nearly all agreed that hoarders feel a strong sense of loss when their collections are removed.

As a result, APS workers strive to collaborate with the hoarder in organizing the home rather than removing objects without the hoarder's permission or involvement. Nearly all agree that the most effective intervention strategy involves collaborative problem-solving with the client and most agree that gentle persuasion is an effective strategy. Only about one-third of the workers consider separating the client from hoarded objects to allow for removal of clutter to be an effective intervention strategy.

*Relationship of Elderly Women to Their Possessions*

Consumer researchers Price et al. (2000) identified several symbolic meanings of possessions that are common to elders, including: a representation of the individual's life, a legacy of the self, provision of stability, and a linkage to other times and places.

Hoarding elderly women, then, collect objects that are meaningful, sentimental, useful, or express themselves, as in Donna's case of an elderly woman who saved every item of clothing she ever owned.

Price et al. (2000) also discovered that elders tend to more highly value those objects that have been in their possession for an extended time. The possessions, then, come to symbolize survival during hardships and life changes and become more meaningful and valuable. Survey results provide some evidence to this finding with most APS workers agreeing that hoarders collect and save objects because they see the objects as valuable and irreplaceable.

Although workers did not perceive ageism, sexism, and powerlessness as viable explanations for hoarding among elderly women, they did recognize the strong need for hoarders to control their possessions. More workers strongly agreed with the statement "Hoarders feel they must maintain control over their possessions" than any other statement, suggesting that hoarders' need for maintaining control over possessions exemplifies their need for maintaining control in their lives. As elderly women face mobility, financial, health, social, and functional limitations in their lives, their need to assert control over possessions and their environment intensifies. The need for control is

illustrated in hoarding women's reluctance to work with adult protective services in discarding or organizing their possessions.

### *Conclusion*

Hoarders and non-hoarders alike are strongly invested in their possessions. Like non-hoarders, hoarders have behaviors and a belief system that guides their acquiring, saving, and discarding of possessions, and they attach value, sentiment, meaning, and emotions to their possessions and to their role of being an owner. The relationship between hoarding elderly women and their possessions is particularly strong as their possessions reflect their self-identity and ability to maintain some control in their lives. Like non-hoarders, the connection between possessions and the hoarder is based more on emotions and symbolic meanings than on the amount of time spent with the possessions or the amount of care provided to the possessions.

### *Components of Hoarding*

Hoarding behavior is comprised of the three inter-related components of acquisition, possessiveness, and reluctance to discard. While hoarders may vary in terms of their belief systems, functioning levels, objects they prefer to hoard, and their social connection to others, they are similar in that all of them are involved in acquiring, possessing, and not discarding objects. This section discusses each component and how the survey and interview results relate to the components.

### *Acquisition*

In this context, acquisition is the compulsive accumulating of objects that hoarders will collect to excess. In studies by Frost et al. (1998) and Kyrios et al. (2004),

compulsive buying was found to be significantly correlated with compulsive hoarding. In the 2004 study comparing compulsive buyers with controls, Kyrios found that compulsive buying was associated with the belief that acquisition would provide security, compensate for emotional voids, and neutralize negative feelings, and that compulsive buyers strongly need to have control over the act of acquisition. Results of the survey indicated that APS workers agree that hoarded objects provide a sense of security and that hoarders feel they must maintain control over their possessions, but workers did not feel that hoarders accumulate in order to numb negative feelings.

The valid items measuring acquisition grouped together to form one factor in the factor analysis, with high correlations between all three items. The majority of APS workers agreed with all three acquisition items—hoarders show a relentless need / desire to acquire more objects, hoarders enjoy bringing more and more objects into their homes, and hoarders spend a lot of time every week buying or acquiring items to add to their collection.

About a third of the statements interviewed workers made about acquisition related to idiosyncratic characteristics of hoarders. In fact, workers discussed acquisition within a context of idiosyncratic characteristics much more frequently than when they discussed possessiveness or discarding, demonstrating that workers are more likely to see an indicator of mental illness or cognitive dysfunction when observing acquisition behaviors than when they observe possessiveness or discarding behaviors. Workers often explained acquisition as being based on deprivation, compulsions, or addiction, though



some statements suggested that hoarding elderly women enjoyed the process of acquiring items for their collections.

The regression analysis revealed that as education, job longevity, employment history in the APS program, direct service responsibility, and number of hoarding cases increases, the predicted score in acquisition increases. In other words, acquisition is explainable as a component of hoarding but is a clearer component of hoarding among workers who are highly educated, have long employment histories in the local agency and in APS, are primarily dedicated to direct service, and who have extensive experience in hoarding cases.

#### *Possessiveness*

As acquisition can be defined as a relentless need to acquire more objects, possessiveness can be seen as a relentless need to save objects of personal value to hoarders. In fact, Frost et al. (1995) found that in comparison to non-hoarders, hoarders had a stronger need to control objects, were more emotionally attached to possessions, and derive more sentimental value and comfort from objects. This difference between hoarders and non-hoarders was evidenced in the survey finding in which nearly all APS workers indicated that elderly women who hoard are more emotionally attached to their possessions than elderly women who do not hoard. In all, 99% of the responding APS workers indicated that elderly women who hoard are emotionally attached to their possessions.

The emotional attachment to possessions can be observed especially in elderly women who hoard animals. Of the recent cases of hoarding that APS workers described

in the survey, about a third of the cases involved animal hoarding, particularly cat hoarding. Like findings by Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) (Arluke et al., 2002), animal hoarding was much more prevalent among women than men, with 63% of the hoarding women collecting animals in comparison to only 33% of the men hoarders. In the HARC study, animal hoarders explained that the reasons for accumulating animals include: loving the animals, to save the animals, nobody else would care for them, animals were their only friend, and the animals functioned as surrogate children.

This study similarly explored the themes of hoarders loving their animals and animals functioning as surrogate children. Workers whose most recent hoarding case involved animal hoarding, for example, were more likely to consider emotional attachment and loving their possessions as sound explanations for hoarding than workers whose recent case did not involve animal hoarding. Similarly, in the 17 cases that the interviewed APS workers discussed, four of the cases involved animal hoarding, including a woman who had 95 cats, a couple with 13 chihuahua dogs, a woman with 27 cats and dogs, and a couple who hoarded 30 – 40 cats. The workers talked about how the animals were substitutes for social contact, provided companionship, and how the hoarder considered the pets her children.

The interviews with the five APS workers discovered that emotional attachment is the main theme in understanding possessiveness as a component of hoarding. The workers discussed how possessing objects is important to elderly women who hoard because the possessions offer some link to the past, substitute for close social

relationships, provide comfort during a stressful transition, symbolize a need for control, provide opportunity for the hoarder to utilize existing skills, or the hoarding represents an intense fear of future deprivation. The emotional attachment to hoarded objects is further verified through the survey results that showed that the vast majority of APS workers considered the following possessiveness items as providing sound explanations for hoarding: (a) Hoarded objects provide a sense of comfort; (b) Hoarded objects provide a sense of security; (c) Hoarders are strongly emotionally attached to their possessions; and (d) Hoarders really love their hoarded possessions.

Another major theme in understanding possessiveness is the hoarder's belief in the potential usefulness of objects. The survey results showed that nearly all APS workers agreed that hoarders keep objects because they may be of use some day and that hoarders collect and save objects because they see the objects as useful and functional. Workers offered potential usefulness as an explanation for the hoarding of three specific cases—Anne's case of an elderly man who hoarded newspapers because they may give him ideas for making inventions, Bob's case of an elderly woman and her sister who would forage through the landfill for useful and repairable objects, and Emily's case of an elderly woman who hoarded documents because they may be needed in the future. This need to save items of current or potential usefulness mirrors studies by Csikszentmihayli and Rochberg-Holton (1981), Frost and Gross (1993), Furby (1978), and Kamptner (1995) that hoarders and non-hoarders alike save possessions for instrumental (usefulness) reasons.

The qualitative and quantitative results demonstrate that whether hoarders save possessions for emotional attachment or usefulness reasons, hoarders are compelled to own objects. Workers talked about how the role of being an owner was extremely important to hoarders and how hoarders feel an intense responsibility for possessions, a finding supported in the literature through several studies (Frost & Hartl, 1993; Frost et al., 1995; Saxena & Maidment, 2004; Steketee et al., 2003).

Hoarders' need for possessions and their personal meaningfulness was illustrated in a newspaper article about a woman whose trailer was cluttered with an assortment of books and other prized possessions. The article described how as a child, Barbara collected an assortment of rocks, shells, leaves and flowers pressed in books, as well as endless jars of insects kept for show-and-tell. Like her parents, Barbara is a hoarder, particularly of books.

"I go into a trance when I look at books," she says. Now at 62, Barbara has walls lined with tomes. Her collection—estimated at 50,000 editions—rivals the stock of nearby bookstores. Her formidable stash also includes LPs, videos, audiocassettes, computer stuff, tools, craft materials, odd pieces of fabric, beads, shoes, hats, gloves, scarves, purses, tote bags, cat paraphernalia, radios by the dozen, mirrors, beer steins and liquor glasses...All this booty is stashed in her 12-by-16 foot single-wide mobile home... (Strubbe, 2000, p. 8-9).

Another news article suggested that some hoarders save objects for others to use.

Taggart has hoarded everything. Newspapers and magazines by the ton. Endless bundles of coupons. Clothes. Shoes. Cardboard boxes. Plastic crates. Wicker

baskets. Puzzles. Children's toys and games...“They call it trash,” she said. “It’s not that at all. I save only items that are useful to me or someone else”...If you think about it, she’s right about how casually we throw everything away. We *are* a disposable society, and not just with old toys and clothes. We throw away people, too (Holmberg, 2004, p. B1, B7).

The study found that there was little support for an explanation of saving items because they could be useful to others. In the item “Hoarders keep objects because other people may benefit from them,” workers were sharply divided, with half agreeing and the other half disagreeing with the statement. In the interviews of APS workers, the need to save items for others’ potential benefit was mentioned in only one case—Carol’s case of two elderly men who compulsively purchased things through the television shopping network with the intention of presenting the purchases as gifts.

### *Reluctance to Discard*

As a component of hoarding, discarding involves hoarders’ challenges in differentiating between items of value and worthlessness, difficulty making decisions, and the sense of loss and stress that accompanies throwing away possessions. The difficulties in differentiating, making decisions, and discarding items were found in the qualitative and quantitative study results, as well as in research studies conducted by Randy Frost (Frost & Hartl, 1993; Frost et al., 1995; Steketee et al., 2003)

In comparison to questions about acquisition or possessiveness, workers tended to agree more strongly and more frequently about the group of questions related to discarding and considered the reluctance to discard items as being sound explanations for

hoarding, illustrating how workers have more familiarity with issues around throwing possessions away than their acquisition or need to save. A large majority of workers agreed or strongly agreed with the statements: (a) The thought of throwing away hoarded objects creates a lot of distress for the hoarder; (b) Hoarders have great difficulty evaluating what objects are useful and what objects are useless; (c) Hoarders cannot decide what objects to throw away and what objects to keep; (d) Hoarders feel intensely violated when their objects are discarded; (e) Hoarders feel a strong sense of loss when their collections are removed; (f) Hoarders plan to organize their hoarded collection “some day;” and (g) To hoarders, discarding items feels like losing part of the self. The majority of workers responded that very sound explanations for hoarding include that hoarders have difficulty making decisions, cannot decide what to throw away, and avoid the stress of throwing objects away.

Despite how workers see reluctance to discard as a major component of hoarding, interviewed workers rarely discussed throwing away or disposing of hoarded objects. When disposal interventions were discussed, workers implied great difficulty engaging the hoarder in organizing possessions, acknowledging that the hoarder has the right to not accept services.

### *Conclusions*

While several themes were apparent in the qualitative and quantitative study findings, the interviewed workers cautioned about making generalizations about hoarders or hoarding. Workers indicated that there are “multiple dynamics” involved and no single explanatory factor. While this study validated several themes discussed in other

research studies, the interviews with the adult protective services workers clearly showed that hoarding is a multi-dimensional issue with hoarders as varied as all people.

#### Strengths and Limitations of Study

The strength of this research study is the mixed methods approach that permits the rich experiences of APS workers to be compared with the survey results. By combining methodologies, the qualitative and quantitative results can be compared and can offer validation and confirmation of findings. The process allows for results to be examined in terms of both their depth and breadth, allowing the personal stories of APS workers to explain the survey findings while the survey findings allow for greater generalizability and a broader perspective than the interviews alone.

The findings were similar between the qualitative and quantitative analyses, demonstrating that there are clear themes underlying hoarding. Common themes include the intense need of hoarders to collect, the severe loss hoarders feel when confronted with discarding possessions, the emotional attachment to possessions, hoarders' beliefs in the functionality of items, and the possessions symbolizing self-identity, comfort, personal and public meanings, and a need for control.

Another strength of the study is that it strives to explore a phenomenon in which little is known or understood. Because there is little empirical research available, this study offers to contribute to a new field of knowledge, thereby increasing the awareness and education of adult protective services staff and other professionals who address hoarding situations.

The most significant weaknesses of this study are that the survey instrument was newly-created and that the unit of analysis was APS workers. Because the instrument was original and could not be validated prior to sending it to APS workers, several items needed to be eliminated during the factor analysis to increase the loading levels. Because the unit of analysis is APS workers and not hoarders themselves, the results were biased by a secondhand account, particularly because the workers witness the hoarding only in response to getting a complaint. The worker, who is charged with assessing and resolving a problem, will tend to look at hoarding as problematic.

The instrument could be improved by eliminating items with low loadings and by expanding the diagnostic questions. Additional questions about the workers' perceptions about hoarders' physical, social, functional, psychological, and emotional challenges could then be traced to intervention strategies and outcomes. It is hoped that this process could lead to the development of a decision matrix that links belief systems and impairments to a variety of effective intervention strategies.

Another limitation is the framing of the research study within a functionalism perspective. While Functionalism as a theoretical basis to this study contributed to the ability to explore hoarding as personally and socially purposeful, it was limited in that Functionalism does not explain individual hoarding behavior, is typically considered an antiquated theory because of its over-emphasis on the immutability of social stratification, and overlooks society's ability to affect change. Other research utilizing feminist, systems, or other approaches could lead to more empowering models of intervention in case of hoarding.



### Implications for Social Work

The research findings highlight the tendency of adult protective services workers to assume the existence of a mental illness, though they were also aware of how belief systems can contribute to hoarding behavior. Furthermore, most adult protective services workers could not view hoarding as a social phenomenon within ageist, classist, and sexist contexts. The results demonstrate a strong need for adult protective services workers to receive consistent and accurate training throughout the state, which could lead to more effective interventions and greater understanding and empathy towards hoarders.

Similar to findings in the survey, the workers interviewed often talked about how they were able to help the hoarder remove clutter and stay in her home once they established a relationship. The ability of the worker and client to build a relationship became key in being able to affect any positive changes. Similarly, problems in relationship-building between the worker and client seemed to inevitably result in an undesired outcome such as an involuntary placement into an assisted living facility, forced removal of animals or possessions, or deteriorated health.

The importance of the worker-client relationship has implications for policy and practice. One of the greatest barriers in establishing the necessary trust with the client is that workers are rarely allowed the time that is essential. One of the interviewed workers, who was very new to both adult protective services and to working in a local department of social services, was allowed the time to visit with one hoarding elderly woman every week for several weeks. Although the woman was initially very resistant to adult protective services, she came to trust the worker and eventually collaborated with

workers in organizing her very cluttered home by giving away hundreds of ceramic statues and other knickknacks. In other localities, the worker would not have been allowed to visit an unwilling client so frequently, and the hoarder would have eventually been forced out, her home condemned, and her possessions removed.

Best practices, then, need to incorporate regular, consistent contact with the hoarder and training on how to engage the hoarder and build trust. The goal of any intervention should entail a collaborative worker-client process of reducing health and safety risks in the hoarder's home. The emphasis should not be on the cleanliness of the home or the absence of clutter or animals. In this way, adult protective services workers are providing the critical services to hoarders that will allow them to stay in their homes instead of striving to maintain hygienic standards in the community.

The research also discovered another issue that has practice and policy implications; i.e., what should be done when a hoarder constantly refuses services, such as the elderly man who never allowed the worker to even discuss removing the stacks of newspapers in his home. Frequently, cases have been closed prematurely, often due to the hoarder's lack of impairments, reluctance to make changes, and inability to understand the potential health and safety risks, leaving family members frustrated by the limited interventions and a disastrous final outcome inevitable. While there should be respect for any individual's right of self-determination and right to create her own living condition standards, closing of these cases borders on social neglect. Workers need to consistently convey their respect of the hoarder's decisions, but continually monitor the case, making attempts to engage the client, suggest medical and psychological

assessments, and work on a collaborative plan. In some cases, the workers were able to help family members intervene and create a safer home, and in other cases, workers utilized family members for advice on how to communicate and build a trusting relationship with the hoarder. When the emphasis was on engaging the hoarder, not forcing cleanliness standards, the outcomes tended to be positive and enduring.

#### Future Research

This research studied how acquisition, possessiveness, and discarding are components of hoarding, the extent to which hoarding is due to idiosyncratic characteristics and functional reasons, and the social, biological, psychological, and cultural factors affecting hoarding. All of these elements warrant additional and more intense research than feasible in this study. Other specific research questions that merit future research include: (a) In what ways are cases seen by adult protective services workers different from those involved in other empirical studies, particularly the extent of mental illness and cognitive dysfunction?; (b) To what extent are society's devaluing of elderly women a factor in hoarding behavior and the choices of possessions hoarded?; (3) What are the similarities and differences in hoarding behavior, particularly belief systems and objects hoarded, among different cultures; and (4) What are similarities and differences in hoarding behavior between men and women, the young and the elderly?

In addition, the voices of hoarding elderly women need to be heard. While adult protective service workers provided rich and observant explanations for hoarding, this research, as well as the current literature available, is limited by overlooking how elderly women view their hoarding behavior. By interviewing elderly women who hoard, the

field of knowledge would be enhanced by learning about their history with hoarding, any events or situations that precipitated hoarding behavior, family history of hoarding, and how hoarding impacted their past and current social lives. Elderly women who hoard and live in the community, as opposed to living in institutions or are part of self-identifying research studies, would particularly contribute to the field of knowledge because they have been traditionally overlooked as research subjects.

It is hoped that this research study will provide a foundation for more research on hoarding in the community by elderly women and more research will be undertaken to gain greater insight into this growing and perplexing phenomenon. The challenge of creating effective interventions can only be met when we are closer to understanding the complex individual and social issues of hoarding among elderly women.

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Appendix A

Cover Letter to Adult Protective Services Workers

February 17, 2006  
 1911 Vandover Road  
 Richmond, VA 23229

Dear Adult Protective Services Worker:

In order to complete my dissertation at the VCU School of Social Work Ph.D. Program, I am researching the issue of hoarding.\* I became interested in the issue of hoarding when I worked in APS in the Home Office and I thought that you, as an APS worker, would have more insight into the issue than anyone.

Attached is a copy of a questionnaire that asks for your perspectives on hoarding. You can answer the survey even if you haven't been involved in a case of hoarding because most of the survey is looking for your opinions about why people hoard objects.

Your participation is completely voluntary and there are no direct or indirect consequences if you decide not to participate. You may skip any questions that create discomfort. There are no known risks for completing this survey. Your completion of the survey implies your consent and that you understand that participation is voluntary.

The survey is coded so that non-respondents can be tracked, but I will discard the listing of workers at the end of the project to assure confidentiality. Your name will be kept in a secured, password-protected computer database only for the purpose of tracking non-respondents and neither your name nor your locality will be published in the final dissertation.

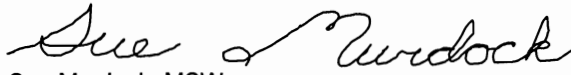
Please complete the enclosed survey and return in the self-addressed stamped envelope by March 3. If you have any questions or would like to know the results of this study, please contact me at [murdocksj@vcu.edu](mailto:murdocksj@vcu.edu) or (home) 804-217-7866 or (work) 804-827-1425.

I am also looking for five APS workers who would be interested in being interviewed about hoarding. If more than five workers express interest, I will randomly select five subjects from those who return the form. I will pay each worker \$20 for about a one-hour survey interview by telephone. If you are willing to be interviewed, please complete this form:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Yes, I would like to participate in a telephone survey and receive \$20 payment!</b>	
Name: _____	Best days and times to call for the telephone survey:
Address: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Sunday _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Thursday _____
City, State, Zip: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Monday _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Friday _____
Email: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Tuesday _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Saturday _____
Telephone number(s): (cell) _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Wednesday _____
(home) _____ (work) _____	

Thank you for your participation. I look forward to reading your answers!

Sincerely,

  
 Sue Murdock, MSW

\* Hoarding: significant clutter, inability to use living space, and impaired functioning due to accumulating objects of little usefulness.

Appendix B  
Hoarding Questionnaire

## Hoarding Questionnaire

1. What is your position?

- Social Worker
- Senior Social Worker
- Supervisor
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

2. How long have you worked in an adult protective services unit? \_\_\_\_ years

3. How long have you worked in your current local department of social services? \_\_\_\_ years

4. What type of area is the locality in which you work?

- Rural
- Suburban
- Urban

5. In general, what percentage of time do you spend on:

APS investigations \_\_\_\_\_

APS / Adult Services service provision / case management \_\_\_\_\_

APS / Adult Services administration / supervision \_\_\_\_\_

Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Total: 100%

6. In the last two years, approximately how many cases of elderly self-neglect did you see?

(This includes all cases, founded or unfounded, of self-neglect involving an elderly person at least 60 years old with whom you provided direct services, indirect services, or supervision. A case is one individual; self-neglecting spouses are considered two cases.)

\_\_\_\_\_ cases of elderly self-neglect

6a. Of these cases of elderly self-neglect, please estimate:

Number of male, elderly self-neglecters \_\_\_\_\_ cases

→ How many showed hoarding behavior? \_\_\_\_\_ cases

Number of female, elderly self-neglecters \_\_\_\_\_ cases

→ How many showed hoarding behavior? \_\_\_\_\_ cases

7. In cases in which you actually visited the home, approximately how many cases of hoarding\* have you seen during the last two years? \_\_\_\_\_ cases of hoarding

If you have seen at least one case of hoarding, please complete the other side of this page. ☞  
If you have not seen any cases of hoarding, please go to question 9.

\* Hoarding: significant clutter, inability to use living space, and impaired functioning due to accumulating objects of little usefulness

[murdocksj@vcu.edu](mailto:murdocksj@vcu.edu)

8. Think about the *most recent* case of hoarding that you have seen. Please describe the case:

a. Gender

- Male  Female

b. Age: \_\_\_\_ years old (*Estimate if not sure.*)

c. Which of the following items did the hoarder collect in large quantities? (*Check all that apply.*)

- |                                     |  |                                       |
|-------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Newspapers | <input type="checkbox"/> Trash             | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Magazines  | <input type="checkbox"/> Bags              | <input type="checkbox"/> Cats         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Food       | <input type="checkbox"/> Catalogs          | <input type="checkbox"/> Dogs         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clothing   | <input type="checkbox"/> Containers        | <input type="checkbox"/> Farm animals |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Books      | <input type="checkbox"/> Cards/letters     | <input type="checkbox"/> Other        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Junk mail  | <input type="checkbox"/> Brochures, flyers | animals _____                         |

d. Which of the following problems, if any, were present at the hoarder's home? (*Check all that apply.*)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clutter piled on top of oven / kitchen counters / appliances | <input type="checkbox"/> Doors / windows blocked by clutter    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clutter in sinks / bathtub                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> No running water                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clutter stacked on hoarder's bed                             | <input type="checkbox"/> Feces / urine                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clutter stacked on other furniture                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Roaches, mice, rats, or other vermin  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Narrow passageways due to clutter                            | <input type="checkbox"/> Rotting food / trash                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yard filled with unusable objects/trash                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Health / safety risks                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Extensive debris on floor                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Other ( <i>please specify</i> ) _____ |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> None of the above                     |

e. Based on either a diagnosis or your professional opinion, which of the following disorders, if any, were presented by the hoarder? (*Check all that apply.*)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Obsessive-compulsive disorder    | <input type="checkbox"/> Brain trauma                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Depression                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Schizophrenia                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bipolar disorder                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Memory loss                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dementia                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Other ( <i>please specify</i> ) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other confusion / disorientation | <input type="checkbox"/> No disorder                           |

f. Which of the following intervention strategies, if any, were used with this case? (*Check all that apply.*)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Forced, involuntary cleanout       | <input type="checkbox"/> Placement with family member          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Psychiatric assessment             | <input type="checkbox"/> Placement in assisted living facility |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Medical evaluation                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Placement in nursing home             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Counseling / therapy               | <input type="checkbox"/> Home condemned                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Medication                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Animals removed                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Client worked with APS on cleanout | <input type="checkbox"/> Home-based service provision          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Case management monitoring         | <input type="checkbox"/> Unfounded; case closed                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Client removed from home           | <input type="checkbox"/> Other ( <i>please specify</i> ) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Client hospitalized                | <input type="checkbox"/> None of the above                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Guardianship sought                |  |

9. Now think about *elderly women who hoard*. For each of the following statements, please indicate whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree, based on your professional opinion.

<u>Acquisition</u>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>
a. Hoarders show a relentless need / desire to acquire more objects.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Hoarders enjoy bringing more and more objects into their homes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Hoarders spend a lot of time every week buying or acquiring items to add to their collection.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<u>Possessiveness</u>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>
a. Hoarders feel a sense of comfort with their hoarded possessions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Hoarders are convinced their collection has value.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Hoarders feel they must maintain control over their possessions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Possessions feel like extensions of the hoarder's identity.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Hoarders keep objects because they may be of use some day.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. Hoarders keep objects because other people may benefit from them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g. Hoarders get angry if someone touches or moves their possessions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h. Because they worry they will forget something, hoarders save everything.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. Hoarders collect and save objects because they see the objects as:					
o Useful.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
o Functional.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
o Valuable.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
o Irreplaceable.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<u>Discarding</u>	<b><u>Strongly Agree</u></b>	<b><u>Agree</u></b>	<b><u>Disagree</u></b>	<b><u>Strongly Disagree</u></b>	<b><u>Not Sure</u></b>
a. The thought of throwing away hoarded objects creates a lot of distress for the hoarder.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Hoarders have great difficulty evaluating what objects are useful and what objects are useless.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Hoarders cannot decide what objects to throw away and what objects to keep.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Hoarders feel intensely violated when their objects are discarded.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Hoarders feel a strong sense of loss when their collections are removed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. Hoarders plan to organize their hoarded collection "some day."	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g. To hoarders, discarding items feels like losing part of the self.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h. Hoarders are afraid of making mistakes when they dispose of items.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<u>Intervention</u>	<b><u>Strongly Agree</u></b>	<b><u>Agree</u></b>	<b><u>Disagree</u></b>	<b><u>Strongly Disagree</u></b>	<b><u>Not Sure</u></b>
a. In deciding on an intervention strategy, the most important issues to keep in mind are:					
o Client self-determination.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
o Health / safety risk to client.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
o Health / safety risk to others in client's home...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
o Health / safety risk to community.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. The most effective intervention strategies involve:					
o Collaborative problem-solving with the client...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
o Psychiatric treatment.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
o Gentle persuasion.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
o Separating the client from hoarded objects to allow for removal of clutter.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

10. Thinking about why an elderly woman would hoard seemingly useless objects, how much do you think the following statements explain why she would hoard?

	<u>Very Sound Explanation For Hoarding</u>	<u>Somewhat Sound Explanation For Hoarding</u>	<u>Fairly Sound Explanation For Hoarding</u>	<u>Not Sound Explanation For Hoarding</u>
Acquisition				
Possessiveness				
Discarding				



11. In your opinion, to what extent are elderly women who hoard emotionally attached to their collection?

- Significantly emotionally attached to their collection
- Emotionally attached to their collection
- Somewhat emotionally attached to their collection
- Not at all emotionally attached to their collection

12. In comparison to elderly women who do not hoard, elderly women who hoard are:

- Significantly more emotionally attached to their possessions
- More emotionally attached to their possessions
- Somewhat more emotionally attached to their possessions
- Not at all more emotionally attached to their possessions

13. Please indicate the following information about yourself.

a. Gender:

- Male
- Female

b. Age: \_\_\_\_\_ years old

c. Highest level of education:

- High school diploma
- Some college
- College degree
- Masters degree
- Post-graduate degree
- Other (*please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_

d. Discipline in highest educational level:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Business         | <input type="checkbox"/> Medicine                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Counseling       | <input type="checkbox"/> Nursing                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Criminal justice | <input type="checkbox"/> Psychology                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> General studies  | <input type="checkbox"/> Public administration                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gerontology      | <input type="checkbox"/> Sociology                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Government       | <input type="checkbox"/> Social work                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Health           | <input type="checkbox"/> Other ( <i>please specify</i> ) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Human services   |  |

Thank you for completing this survey! Please return in the enclosed envelope or to:

Sue Murdock  
1911 Vandover Road  
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Appendix C  
Quantitative Data

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
Hoarders show a relentless need / desire to acquire more objects.	28%	56%	14%	2%
Hoarders enjoy bringing more and more objects into their homes.	33%	53%	13%	2%
Hoarders spend a lot of time every week buying or acquiring items to add to their collection.	19%	52%	27%	2%
Hoarders feel a sense of comfort with their hoarded possessions.	48%	48%	4%	0%
Hoarders are convinced their collection has value.	49%	43%	7%	1%
Hoarders feel they must maintain control over their possessions.	56%	42%	2%	0%
Possessions feel like extensions of the hoarder's identity.	32%	62%	5%	1%
Hoarders keep objects because they may be of use some day.	52%	41%	7%	0%
Hoarders keep objects because other people may benefit from them.	16%	34%	40%	10%
Hoarders get angry if someone touches or moves their possessions.	39%	55%	7%	0%
Because they worry they will forget something, hoarders save everything.	17%	62%	16%	5%
Hoarders collect and save objects because they see the objects as:				
○ Useful.....	36%	57%	8%	0%
○ Functional.....	29%	57%	14%	0%
○ Valuable.....	37%	50%	13%	0%
○ Irreplaceable.....	30%	55%	16%	0%
The thought of throwing away hoarded objects creates a lot of distress for the hoarder.	59%	40%	1%	0%
Hoarders have great difficulty evaluating what objects are useful and what objects are useless.	63%	34%	3%	0%
Hoarders cannot decide what objects to throw away and what objects to keep.	56%	37%	6%	1%
Hoarders feel intensely violated when their objects are discarded	66%	40%	1%	0%
Hoarders feel a strong sense of loss when their collections are removed.	65%	34%	1%	0%
Hoarders plan to organize their hoarded collection "some day."	41%	44%	13%	2%
To hoarders, discarding items feels like losing part of the self.	34%	61%	5%	0%
Hoarders are afraid of making mistakes when they dispose of items.	33%	54%	13%	0%

<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>
In deciding on an intervention strategy, the most important issues to keep in mind are:					
○ Client self-determination.....	43%	49%	5%	0%	3%
○ Health / safety risk to client.....	66%	34%	0%	0%	0%
○ Health / safety risk to others in client's home...	41%	48%	8%	1%	2%
○ Health / safety risk to community.....	27%	57%	14%	1%	1%
The most effective intervention strategies involve:					
○ Collaborative problem-solving with the client...					
○ Psychiatric treatment.....	57%	35%	5%	0%	3%
○ Gentle persuasion.....	11%	48%	21%	1%	19%
○ Separating the client from hoarded objects to allow for removal of clutter.....	25%	45%	21%	6%	3%
	6%	30%	38%	11%	14%

Thinking about why an elderly woman would hoard seemingly useless objects, how much do you think the following statements explain why she would hoard?

	<u>Very Sound Explanation For Hoarding</u>	<u>Somewhat Sound Explanation For Hoarding</u>	<u>Fairly Sound Explanation For Hoarding</u>	<u>Not Sound Explanation For Hoarding</u>	
Acquisition	Hoarding elderly women prefer social isolation, so they hoard useless objects to keep people away.	5%	11%	17%	67%
	Hoarders prefer their clutter over the company of friends and family.	7%	23%	26%	44%
	At a time when their health is failing and loved ones are dying, hoarding allows elderly women a sense of power.	15%	31%	33%	21%
	Hoarding elderly women, having been victims of ageism and sexism, hoard objects to assert control over their lives.	10%	22%	34%	34%
	Hoarding reduces stress.	14%	28%	21%	37%
Possessiveness	Hoarders accumulate more and more stuff in order to numb out negative feelings.	10%	22%	32%	36%
	Hoarded objects provide a sense of comfort.	49%	35%	13%	3%
	Hoarded objects provide a sense of security.	52%	32%	13%	2%
	Hoarded objects may be of use some day in the future.	48%	30%	13%	10%
	Hoarders are strongly emotionally attached to their possessions.	58%	25%	14%	2%
Discarding	Hoarders really love their hoarded possessions	39%	28%	19%	15%
	Hoarders have difficulty making decisions.	52%	25%	11%	11%
	Hoarders cannot decide what to throw away.	68%	20%	8%	4%
	Throwing away things creates so much stress for the hoarder that s/he avoids it as much as possible.	63%	25%	8%	3%

14. In your opinion, to what extent are elderly women who hoard emotionally attached to their collection?

Significantly emotionally attached to their collection	52%
Emotionally attached to their collection	31%
Somewhat emotionally attached to their collection	16%
Not at all emotionally attached to their collection	1%

15. In comparison to elderly women who do not hoard, elderly women who hoard are:

Significantly more emotionally attached to their possessions	48%
More emotionally attached to their possessions	35%
Somewhat more emotionally attached to their possessions	14%
Not at all more emotionally attached to their possessions	3%