



Review

You are what you own: Reviewing the link between possessions, emotional attachment, and the self-concept in hoarding disorder



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ABSTRACT

Hoarding disorder is a disabling psychiatric disorder, characterized by the acquisition and retention of possessions to the point where it negatively impacts the individual's life, regardless of the value of the items. While treatments for hoarding disorder are promising, the chronic and egosyntonic nature of the disorder means that further development of the underlying theoretical model of hoarding is important in order to improve treatments. In particular, one aspect of hoarding disorder that has not received specific theoretical emphasis is the link between possessions and the self-concept, reflecting notions dating back to William James that what we own can come to define who we are. The purpose of the current review is to specifically examine literature pertinent to the link between possessions and the self-concept in hoarding disorder. The paper includes an examination of the various definitions of self, a review of literature relevant to self in hoarding, an integration of consumer psychology perspectives, and a discussion of treatment implications. The review highlights the need for more dedicated research, the development of an appropriate quantitative measure relevant to the link between possessions and the self-concept, and investigation into possible underlying factors for this link. Potential implications for treatment are highlighted.

1. Introduction

Hoarding disorder (HD), or compulsive hoarding, as it was previously known, is characterized by a persistent difficulty in discarding possessions regardless of their value, resulting in the accumulation of clutter within the home, to the extent that the normal use of the living space is compromised (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Hoarding is significantly disabling, with people who hoard taking an average of seven days off work a month due to psychiatric reasons; a number equivalent to that by people with bipolar and psychotic disorders and significantly more than that by individuals with anxiety and depressive disorders (Tolin, Frost, Steketee, Gray, & Fitch, 2008). These negative outcomes also extend to the people who live alongside people with HD. Family environments that are severely cluttered have been linked with increased childhood distress, reduced social engagement, heightened family conflict, and shame regarding the state of the home (Tolin, Frost, Steketee, & Fitch, 2008).

The observed impact on life and the difficulty in treating hoarding prompted Frost and Hartl (1996) to develop the cognitive-behavioral model of HD. Based on clinical experience, as well as a growing body of hoarding research, they conceptualized hoarding as a problem stemming from four related areas: behavioral avoidance, information-processing

deficits, distorted beliefs regarding the nature or importance of possessions, and problematic emotional attachments to possessions (Frost & Hartl, 1996; Frost & Steketee, 1998). Kellett and Holden (2014) highlighted that of the four components of the model, emotional attachment to objects in hoarding had been studied the least. In their review of the literature surrounding emotional attachment, only 15 studies were identified, and just four of these were designed primarily to investigate emotional attachment in HD (Kellett & Holden, 2014). Furthermore, the cognitive model suggests that emotional attachment itself encompasses three specific subcomponents—possessions providing comfort and security, possessions having human-like qualities, and possessions representing an extension of self-concept (Frost & Hartl, 1996).

Much of the prior research has explored the broader construct of emotional attachment to possessions rather than the specific components within. For example, most of the studies identified by Kellett and Holden (2014) utilized the broad concept of emotional attachment rather than investigating the relationship between its specific components and HD. Many of these studies utilized the Saving Cognitions Inventory (SCI; Steketee, Frost, & Kyrios, 2003)—a measure of attitudes and beliefs commonly associated with hoarding behavior—which contains items relevant to self-concept within a broader subscale of emotional attachment. This empirically derived subscale contains items originally intended

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to capture self-concept, comfort, loss, and uniqueness in relation to possessions. This subscale is the longest of the SCI subscales and explained the largest percentage of overall variance in the total scale (55%), underscoring the importance of emotional attachment related thinking in HD. However, the factor structure does not separate the importance of the self-concept related thinking from other aspects of emotional attachment. In turn, it is not possible to discern the individual importance of links between possessions and self-concept in HD using the SCI.

Those empirical studies that have sought to disentangle the relationship of specific components of emotional attachment to HD have only examined two of the three aspects—possessions as sources of comfort, and anthropomorphic tendencies in HD. Hartl, Duffany, Allen, Steketee, and Frost (2005) developed the Possessions Comfort Scale (PCS) to specifically measure the first of these constructs, reflecting the feelings of comfort and safety derived from possessions in HD. Using the scale, they found that 26 individuals with HD derived significantly more feelings of security and comfort from their possessions compared to 36 members of the control group, with a moderate effect size (Cohen's $d = .52$; Hartl et al., 2005). Nedelisky and Steele (2009) utilized the Reciprocal Attachment Questionnaire (RAQ; West, Sheldon, & Reiffer, 1987; West & Sheldon-Keller, 1992) to explore attachment relationships in hoarding. They found that individuals with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) with hoarding symptomatology ($n = 14$) were significantly more likely to seek comfort or care from possessions than individuals with OCD that did not hoard ($n = 16$), producing a very large effect size ($d = 1.59$).

Similar quantitative approaches have also been employed to investigate the second component of emotional attachment—the tendency of people with HD to anthropomorphize or imbue their possessions with human characteristics or feelings (Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2008). In the first empirical examination of anthropomorphism in hoarding, Timpano and Shaw (2013) found that an increased tendency to anthropomorphize possessions was associated with greater hoarding severity ($r = .29$) in a non-clinical student sample ($N = 72$). Neave, Jackson, Saxton, and Hönekopp (2015) developed the Anthropomorphism Questionnaire (AQ) specifically to measure this aspect of hoarding phenomenology, and found that it effectively predicted levels of hoarding behavior ($R^2 = .34$) in a non-clinical sample of 93 adults.

More generally, qualitative studies have also helped us to develop an understanding surrounding the specific components of emotional attachment in hoarding. Cherrier and Ponnor (2010) conducted a video-ethnographic study exploring the motivations underlying hoarding in eight people that classified themselves as functional hoarders. Three themes emerged that were relevant to notions of emotional attachment in hoarding: memories, comfort, and responsibility for the object (anthropomorphizing). Kellett, Greenhalgh, Beail, and Ridgway (2010) also explored the experiences of 11 self-identified compulsive hoarders and their relationships to possessions, yielding two themes relevant to emotional attachment: anthropomorphizing of objects and a sense of “fusion” between the individual and their possessions. For example, one participant outlined how possessions become linked with the self-concept of people who hoard, asserting “it's a part of them, even ridiculous year old newspapers” (Kellett et al., 2010, p. 146). Kellett and colleagues suggested that people that hoard have difficulty separating their self-concept from their possessions; and that the degree of clutter may exacerbate these difficulties.

However, these qualitative studies were not dedicated to investigating a specific component of emotional attachment in HD, and prior quantitative research has been predominantly focused on either the comfort-security or human-like qualities of possessions. In turn, the link between objects and self-concept has not received specific theoretical emphasis and no measures currently exist to specifically quantify this key component of emotional attachment in HD. Clinical experience suggests that this aspect may be crucial in the treatment of some cases of HD (Frost, Tolin, & Maltby, 2010); where components of personal

self-concept have become melded with the possessions the individual seeks to discard. As such, this review aims to draw on the existing literature to provide some examination of this construct. We aim to expand upon previous work by Kellett and Holden (2014) by specifically reviewing literature relevant to the link between possessions and the self-concept in HD. We provide an examination of the various definitions of self, a review of the relevant literature, an integration of consumer psychology perspectives, and a discussion of treatment implications. Taken together, the paper attempts to provide a clear direction for future research centered on the link between possessions and the self-concept in HD.

2. Method

Due to the nature of the review and the dearth of specific literature, a targeted systematic review was deemed to be inappropriate. However, in order to identify papers relevant to the link between possessions and the self-concept in HD, studies were identified through searches of EBSCOHost databases including: PsycINFO, Medline Complete, SocINDEX, and Business Source Complete as well as Embase. We utilized the following combination of terms: (possession* or item* or object or thing* or stuff or material* or objects) and (attachment* or connection* or link* or bond) and (hoard* or collector* or saver* or pack rat* or gatherer* or accumulator*). All databases were searched on the 29th of June 2016, with the combined searches returning 530 articles for review. For the review section of the paper, we only included studies that provided data relevant to link between possessions and the self-concept in HD, that were written in English, that involved human subjects, and that had been peer reviewed.

3. Defining the self-concept

Psychological discussion surrounding the self and possessions first emerged over a century ago. Famously, William James (1890) stated that “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 land and horses, and yacht and bank account” (p. 353). James proposed the notion of an empirical self, which is composed of the material self, the social self, and the spiritual self. The material self reflects our body, clothes, family, and property. The social self is the recognition received from friends and the different facades we present across social circles. Finally, the spiritual self is our reflective inner workings, “to think ourselves thinkers” (James, 1890, p. 296). However, the studies that followed James' work proposed a vast array of amendments, and sometimes entirely different conceptualizations, of the self (see discussion in Epstein, 1973).

In contemporary work, Katzko (2003) suggested that theorizing about the self had expanded to the extent that notions of the self had become vague and imprecise. Indeed, the editor of the journal “Self and Identity” stated:

As pleased as I am with the vitality of the field and the success of the journal, one question troubles me nearly every time I read an article that invokes the construct of “self”—what are we really talking about when we refer to the “self?” (Leary, 2004, p. 1)

Leary and Tangney (2003) outlined how the self is used by some authors to represent the physical person, as in “self-mutilation”. In contrast, others have firmly proposed a line between the physical body, made of biochemical substances, and the self constructed out of meaning (Baumeister, 1999). It should be noted that the initial picture was more convoluted still, with James (1890) differentiating between conscious awareness of self (self as known/empirical ego) and the thinking that underlies this process (self as knower/pure ego)—bringing forth problematic notions of the homunculus. Another noted usage is the self as a source of motivation for particular behaviors, which

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