



# The dark side of home: Assessing possession ‘clutter’ on subjective well-being



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## ABSTRACT

This research investigates a “dark side of *home*,” created when the experiential quality of *home* is compromised by ‘clutter,’ defined as an overabundance of possessions that collectively create chaotic and disorderly living spaces. Based on relationships among constructs largely developed by phenomenologists, we conceptualize psychological home as a reflection of one’s need to identify self with a physical environment. Clutter was proposed as an antagonist to the normally positive benefits and consequences of *home* for subjective well-being. An online survey was conducted with a population of U.S. and Canadian adults. A structural equation model was used to test hypotheses. Findings reveal that place attachment and self-extension tendencies toward possessions positively contribute to psychological home. Clutter had a negative impact on psychological home and subjective well-being. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how meanings of *home* are both cultivated and undermined by individuals’ place-making efforts.

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## 1. Introduction

The existential experience of *home* as a universal, important reflection and source of self-identity for individuals has been established across multiple scholarly disciplines (e.g., Cziksztentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Mallett, 2004; Moore, 2000). Nevertheless, scholars have noted a number of deficiencies for understanding ‘*home*’ as a psychological construct. First, studies examining *home* have focused on a positive and often romanticized view of *home* as a source of comfort and security, while ignoring negative experiences that can detract from one’s sense of psychological home (Deem, 1986; Donohoe, 2011; Manzo, 2005, 2014). Second, studies that empirically model multi-dimensional facets of *home* and its interrelationships with other concepts, such as place attachment, are needed to advance the understanding of emotional bonds between humans and places (Hernández, Hidalgo, & Ruiz, 2014; Lewicka, 2011). And last, while conceptual frameworks have largely assumed a positive relationship between psychological home and a person’s overall psychological well-being (Sigmon, Whitcomb, & Synder, 2002), this important connection has not

been empirically tested, especially for negative factors that might disrupt this relationship.

The present study explored a “dark side of *home*,” created when the experiential quality of *home* is compromised by clutter. “*Home*” where italicized throughout this paper reflects our use of the word as not simply an individual’s current physical dwelling, but rather the broader constellation of experiences, meanings, and situations that shape and are actively shaped by a person in the creation of his or her lifeworld (Seamon, 1979). Important to people’s efforts at place-making are surrounding themselves with material objects that reflect self. Personal possessions strengthen the interconnectedness between self and *home* (Jacobs & Malpas, 2013), unless they threaten to overwhelm living spaces. Clutter is defined in this paper as an overabundance of material possessions that collectively create disorderly and chaotic home environments. When the volume of possessions becomes excessive, cluttered spaces can interfere with people’s ability to execute normal life activities, such as cooking, cleaning, and moving safely through the home (Frost, Steketee, & Tolin, 2012). Instead of connectedness, clutter can create disconnectedness from important dimensions of at-homeness (Seamon, 2014). Excessive clutter is a hallmark of compulsive hoarding, a remarkably common but often hidden psychological disorder that can pose serious threats to the health, safety, and well-being of the affected person and those who live

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with or near them (Frost & Hartl, 1996; Frost, Steketee, & Williams, 2000). The objective of the present study is to verify empirically within a population affected with mild to severe clutter issues relationships among constructs largely developed by phenomenologists in order to describe the impact of clutter on one's sense of psychological home and quality of life. A primary consequence of clutter is that it can stifle the productive creation of self and ultimately detract from the most important positive benefit of psychological home, that being, a greater sense of psychological well-being (Belk, Seo, & Li, 2007).

## 2. Literature review

A common criticism lodged against studies involving *home* or *place* more generally is lack of a unifying theoretical framework from which to examine antecedents, primary constructs and their interrelationships (Lewicka, 2011). While the body of research on *home* meanings, place attachment, and their relationship to identity processes has grown substantially over the years, progress has developed separately across disciplinary boundaries and epistemological divides (Lewicka, 2011; Manzo, 2005). This study drew insights from the phenomenological literature as a starting point for understanding the complexity of psychological home by relating it conceptually within an ontological structure of meanings, resources, and attachments that confirm and enable existential and self-identity processes.

### 2.1. Conceptualizing psychological home

Moore (2000, p. 207) posited that difficulties associated with conceptualizing *home* may be derived from its central role in everyday life, coupled with its rich contextual significance and strong emotional meanings. Casey, pointing to the phrase “house and home” as two words often used to infer same thing (2009, p. 299) argued for the need to deliteralize “home” by distinguishing it from “house.” *Home*, in Casey's view, is something more than a house, a physical location, or a supporting structure for life's material paraphernalia. He described *home* as a “situation for living” and a foundation for identity. Mugerauer (1994, p. 154) regarded *home* as the site where “I am,” the nexus where identity and place meet to satisfy needs, wants, and prospects of self. Seamon (2014, p. 206) defined *home* as “not only a physical place, but a locus of activities, an anchor of identity, a repository of memories bonding past and present, and a center of stability and continuity.” This broader view of *home* as not only a physical structure but also a vital source of meaning, belonging, and identity is reflected by the term “psychological home.”

Psychologists have identified specific dimensions or meanings associated with psychological home. Després (1991) compiled a list of meanings attached to *home* based on multiple interpretations, including: 1) a space within which a person can realize physical and emotional security and control; 2) a reflection of one's ideas and values, including meaningful possessions contained in the home; 3) a source of continuity and permanence for self-identity; 4) a place to strengthen and secure relationships with others; and 5) a center of purposive entity through engagement in work, hobbies, and leisure activities. Sixsmith (1986) conceptualized *home* as consisting of three dimensions, or “experiential modes,” including personal, social and physical meanings. The Sixsmith framework has proven helpful toward categorizing dimensions of meaning into experiential components, but fails to fully capture the emotional and psychological significance of self-identity reflected in the meaning of *home*.

A comprehensive framework for conceptualizing psychological home has been offered by Sigmon et al. (2002), Sigmon et al. (2002)

approached the construct of psychological home from an individual perspective that describes the dynamic interaction between psychological needs and physical structures. These authors proposed three broad functions of psychological home, namely: 1) establishment of a psychological refuge from the external world by affording benefits that include security, safety, protection, and privacy; 2) development of strong attachments to objects and places within the physical environment that support self-identity; and 3) greater psychological well-being. Overall, Sigmon et al. (2002) viewed creation of psychological home as a process in which individuals actively reflect and enable creation of self-identity using environmental resources and connections.

### 2.2. Place attachment and psychological home

In her examination of *home* as a central concept within Western societies, Moore (2000) proposed that the concept of *home* can be enriched by studies that consider the physical, social, and cultural context within which *home* and “home-like” environments are located. Developing intimacy with physical spaces has been closely tied to self-identity processes (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Toward this end, various scholars have related place to self-identity by describing how particular spaces become “my place” and part of one's self-identity through meanings constructed by experiential processes in the development of self that endow places with meaning and value for the inhabitant (e.g., Fried, 2000; Gustafson, 2001; Jacobson, 2009; Manzo, 2003, 2005).

Much discussion has occurred within the place literature about what makes a place meaningful to self. Casey (2009) argued that what matters most is not simply being in a place, but becoming part of the place through a process of cultivation. While the interior home is focal to individuals' private lifeworld, people incorporate as part of their identity numerous exterior, public places by cultivating relationships that engage them with the broader social and cultural lifeworlds in which they live, work, and play. Through these experiences people develop attachments and a sense of belonging to places. Place philosophers have described the process of “making places” as one in which individuals actively create opportunities within their environment that enable them to be themselves (Smith, Light, & Roberts, 1998).

Using data obtained from interviews with Swedish respondents, Gustafson (2001) identified three major categories commonly attributed to place meanings – self, others, and environment. Gustafson identified four underlying dimensions of the self-others-environment model. The dimension of distinction referred to the need of a meaningful place to be identifiable, including similarities as well as differences that contribute to the ability to categorize and establish what is unique about a place. The dimension of valuation implied that places have a negative or positive valuation that may vary in intensity and influence the level of personal involvement with a place. The dimension of continuity was related to the significance and temporal significance of places in one's life path. Last the temporal dimension of change implied that over time, places may acquire new meanings as people actively make new places “their own” and as places themselves are altered or modified by people's activities and external events. Gustafson's framework has significant implications for analyzing place-related self-identity processes in that it expands prior research (e.g., Sixsmith, 1986; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996) and reflects the dynamic reflexive interplay between self, others, and environments common in earlier phenomenological work on place meanings (e.g., Relph, 1976).

Place scholars have devoted much attention to the conceptualization and measurement of place attachment. In their seminal

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