

Dirty Little Secret: Home Chaos and Professional Organizers

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Accumulation of possessions is a common phenomenon in an affluent society such as the United States. People increasingly share a common ideology that more is better, thus legitimizing acquiring ever more stuff. The dramatic accumulation of possessions and the limitation of organization skills among individuals create frustration and panic in managing time and space, resulting in home clutter and chaos. In this study, we collaborated with a professional organizer in order to explore how such organizers interact with their clients and implement their three-stage organizing system—"See it, Map it, Do it" in helping their clients in a process that moves from identifying to solving the problem of clutter and disorganization in their homes. We use a video ethnographic approach and draw on depth interviews with professional organizers and their past and current clients as well as observations in informants' homes. The research was conducted in order to visualize the issues in disorganization and frustrations of home clutter and chaos as well as the methods and results of the organizers. The meanings of clutter were explored by studying the life stories of our informants and observing the services in our informants' home. Finally, the deep meanings of clutter and the notion of dirty as well as the attachment of possessions are explored.

Keywords: Professional Organizer; Home Clutter and Chaos; Disorganization; Dirty; Video Ethnography

Introduction

With economic growth and the ubiquitous exposure to commercial advertisements, American consumers have come to acquire and aspire to having more things than they need by a sober utilitarian reckoning. The accumulating possessions create increasing problems of clutter as millions of Americans enjoy unprecedented affluence, growing

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home sizes, a decline in the real cost of clothing, furnishings, and many gadgets, and an onslaught of new electronic gadgets and other products. Many consumers lack the ability or will to manage the clutter and chaos in their homes. This has created a market for professional organizers who bring their skills in organizing to both homes and businesses. There has been a dramatic growth in the professional organizing industry in the previous decade. They help consumers become better organized both physically and mentally. Clutter is symbolic dirt or feces and “dirt.” It is part of the pollution which Douglas (1991) defines as “matter out of place.” When perceived as such it provokes disgust and precipitates guilt, shame, and embarrassment. A consumer with a cluttered home is like a child or adult who has soiled himself or herself. Thus, a disorganized home is not only an issue of space utilization in the home, but is also strongly linked to the emotional life of the individual; a physically disorganized home means a disorganized life and a fragmented and chaotic sense of self.

The objective of this study is to better understand the effects of having a professional organizer come into homes to help clients to simplify their lives, organize their homes, and clear the clutter that has prompted them to seek such help. In this research, we collaborated with a professional organizing company—Clear & SIMPLE located in Salt Lake City, Utah and explored how they help their clients to better manage and organize their homes.

Background

Clayton (2003) tells of one Southern California family who lost their home and promptly rented two large self-storage units in which to store their ten rooms plus garage full of possessions. When they were able to get a new house nearly three years later, they went back to the self-storage warehouse to reclaim their things. But instead of transferring them to their new home, they gave away or threw away most all of these stored belongings. It is clear from this and other cases (e.g., Eisenberg 1987; Lidz 2003; Vernon 1999) that our attachment to possessions can sometimes reach levels that defy logic. As American consumers become wealthier we acquire ever more stuff. Even with our dramatically increasing home sizes, for many of us our rate of acquiring and our penchant for accumulating possessions means we face increasing clutter and chaos. One result of such symbolic “dirt” is a rising interest in home organizing as shown in recent home improvement television shows, such as *Clean Sweep*, *Clean House*, and *Mission: Organization*. Dirt, in Douglas’s (1966, 35) terms, is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. A wealth of tips for cleansing ourselves of clutter can be also found in numerous related books, websites, and newsletters dedicated to purging, organizing, and rescuing us from the morass of things in which we find ourselves mired. That this quagmire of stuff is often regarded as a “dirty little secret” is suggested by the names of various twelve-step and support groups such as Messies Anonymous (<http://www.messies.com/>), Clutterers Anonymous (<http://www.clutterersanonymous.net/>), and Clutterless Recovery Group (<http://www.clutterless.org/>). Also, there are many related organizing retail outlets, magazines, professional organizers, and

organizations that counsel and help people throw away useless things and create a clean and lean life (Akhtar 2005, 170). There is also a partial overlap between desires for less clutter and desires for voluntary simplicity, better time management and efficiency, and improving home and personal arrangements through practices such as *Feng Shui* and *Zen* meditation. As this partial overlap suggests, organizing our lives may involve not only changing our behaviors, but also adopting a new mind set or lifestyle. But in the contemporary world there are also strong counter forces related to patterns of affluence, materialism, and consumer culture (Verrengia 2005).

Methodology

The Salt Lake City professional organizer through whom our research was carried out is Clear & SIMPLE. We interviewed and observed principles as well as past and present clients of Clear & SIMPLE. We sought to understand who needs a professional organizer and why. We also examined the effects of having a professional organizer come into homes to help clients to clear the clutter that has prompted them to seek such help, organize their homes, and simplify their lives. At a more theoretical level we seek to provide an understanding of how clutter develops and the meanings attached to the possessions that comprise these accumulations. And we aimed to develop an understanding of what having more or fewer possessions arranged in a more or less well-organized fashion does for consumers.

An ethnographic study was conducted involving observations and depth interviews with former clients and a before, during, and after de-cluttering, was conducted with current and past clients of the focal organizing firm in 2005 and 2006. In addition we observed the process of interaction between the professional organizers and their clients. Eleven informants including two professional organizers, past and current clients of their firm, and audience members at de-cluttering presentations at a home and garden show were interviewed and observed. Depth interviews began with “grand tour” questions about the informant’s family background, life changes, and life events (McCracken 1988). Semi-structured questions related to the informant’s memories of childhood home organization, cleaning and organizing roles in the family, meanings of home, other family members’ organizational and acquisitive and retentive styles, meanings of special possessions, and the expectations from hiring a professional organizer were probed during the interviews. The analysis was hermeneutic and phenomenological by using constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Themes that emerged are discussed in the following sections.

Findings

Reasons Leading to Disorganization

As a disordered environment is perceived as “dirt” (Douglas 1966), clutter and chaos in the home mean a disordered and “dirty” life. The main reason informants give for the creation of their clutter is a long and gradual accretion and accumulation of

possessions. People's explanations for having too many things fall into two categories, namely: (1) we buy more than before because we have the money, and (2) we retain more unwanted things because we have the space and lack the time to sort, organize, and dispose of unwanted things. Since we have so many more things than ever before, we face a tyranny of disorganized possessions that control us more than we control them. Our possessions play an important role in defining our selves, communicating to others, navigating the world, connecting us to our pasts, and expressing our desires (Akhtar 2005, 17); it is hard for a person to give up any of their possessions saturated with such meanings, thus creating problematic accumulations of things. This problem is exacerbated by our lack of time and organizing skills. Although our informants want a simpler and more organized material life, they often do not know what this would entail or how they might achieve it. They do not know where to begin and have a difficult time explaining how the clutter and chaos were created in their homes in the first place. We find that for most of these people disorganization meant that not only were their things cluttered and chaotic, so is their time, their computers, and their lives.

Multiple roles at home and work is another reason given for conflicts in managing time and space which lead to disorganization. Women were perceived as the family member most responsible for managing the home because of societal role expectations. Cleaning and organizing were perceived as "women's work" and we found in our interviews and observations that women were responsible for the majority of housework. The most common client of professional organizers is a middle-aged and middle-class female. This is consistent with the traditional view that most areas of the home are a "woman's territory" as well as a greater reluctance of men to show vulnerability by seeking help. Most of the female informants in our study have their own careers. In Hochschild and Machung's (2003) terms, the woman has her "second shift" at home. One of our informants does not have enough time to organize her home and her life since she has to take care of seven children and concentrates on work and study at the same time. Piles of papers and clutter were created in the corners of her home, evidencing the difficulty she has in managing the home, her family, and her various responsibilities.

The frustration and moral panic associated with the accumulation of things are magnified by the traumatic life events like birth, death, marriage, divorce, retirement, moving, and other such dramatic changes. As different family members have different personalities and lifestyles, conflicts regarding how to organize or arrange home spaces were frequently noticed. If one is extremely neat and tidy while another is not, conflicts and guilt are commonly observed. Some of our informants simply do not know how to organize while others do not perceive the clutter around them or recognize it as a problem until another family member draws the line and says they can stand it no more. Although too many possessions and too much disorganization is a very common problem, only a fraction of us get to this point and call upon the services of professional organizers.

Roles of the Professional Organizers

The fundamental reason for requesting professional organizing services is when people realize that they have too many things in too unorganized and cluttered an array. The

frustration and panic associated with the accumulation of stuff can precipitate an urgent desire to request help, often as a result of a traumatic life event like divorce or threatened divorce. The role of the professional organizer is not only that of a service provider, but also to bring their “gift” of professional organizing skills and insights to their clients’ material and spiritual life. The professional organizers studied in our research emphasize that requesting help from professional organizers is not a shameful thing, but the acceptance of a gift that can enrich their life and rebuild a more organized and better life for them and their family. According to the organizers in our study, over 90% of the population in the United States lacks organizing skills. They do not know how to deal with the accumulated and disorganized clutter and chaos. The expected outcome of organizing as seen by the organizers is that the client can enjoy an organized, simplified, clean, less polluted, contaminated and stigmatized, and more guilt-free life.

The professional organizer in our study introduced a particular system of organizing homes and offices. The slogan of this system is “*See it, Map it, Do it,*” which is a three-stage system that helps their clients in various ways from identifying the problems of cluttering, to organizing their material worlds, and further to launching the philosophy of a system to enrich their daily lives spiritually. Photos and pictures were used in order to help the clients envision their ideal material life with less clutter and chaos. They also help clients envision their ideals for the flow of materials within their homes. After sorting their possessions, those judged as not important to their lives are then discarded. Boxes, shelves, and files are used to house retained possessions in a more organized fashion. Further, *Feng Shui* and meditation were employed as techniques in rebuilding the home. *Feng Shui*, according to the professional organizers we studied, is an amazing combination of science and art that can be applied to all levels in organizing and remodeling a home. For example, the vertical arrangement of things, metaphorically represents action and is reflected in the movements we make at the beginning of the day as well as in the beginning of the life. This arrangement gives us energy and power at work. On the other hand, horizontal arrangements parallel the actions and positions we assume at the end of the day and at the end of life.

Meditation is another method that helps people to think, gain composure, and prepare themselves to think about what they want and what is their perfect work day in their daily life. These three stages and corresponding techniques not only help the clients restore the things in their lives and simplify the physical worlds of their homes, but also help them to create a vision of a fresh new life for the future.

Excessive Possessions and the Desire of an Organized Home

Within a consumer society, we expand or extend our sense of self through our possessions (Belk 1988). We may come to believe that more things mean a better and more affluent life. Excessive possessive behavior is common in affluent societies like the United States. People define themselves by what they have and they fear that losing any of their possessions is like losing part of their body. But Erich Fromm (2005, 88) asked, “If I am what I have and if what I have is lost, who then am I?” Besides inter-familial

conflicts and traumatic life events, another incentive to simplify is the association of clutter with dirt and even feces. To rid oneself of excess possessions and the chaos of disorder is to become cleaner, less polluted, contaminated and stigmatized, and more guilt-free. It is to emerge from the dirt of a self-made grave and bask in a radiant self defined more by doing than having. Nevertheless, in our affluent society, “clutteraholics” are far more common than simplifiers. But too many possessions threaten to engulf our home and disrupt our lives. When we can no longer manage our increasing piles of possessions we experience frustration and even panic. We may realize that we need somebody to help us to toss things and learn to live in greater simplicity. Thus a large part of the professional organizer’s job is helping people let things go.

Most of the possessions found in the clutter and chaos we studied did not have any practical value for the individuals except memories. Possessions that linked with memories provided special difficulties for our informants to decide whether to keep or to dispose of and give away. The clutter in our informants’ homes was not composed of unwanted things or disposable waste. To the contrary, their clutter was more likely to be composed of possessions that have deep symbolic meanings for them. Some possessions like collections, photo albums, books, souvenirs, clothes, furniture, kitchenware, shoes, videos, paintings were closely connected with and implicated in informants’ memories, histories, relationships, and identities, while other possessions add beauty, entertainment, recreation, security, comfort, and convenience to their lives. Informants often failed to give up these possessions and they instead accumulated such things in their closets, garages, and corners of their homes. Often entire rooms and garages were inaccessible because they were filled with such meaningful stuff. As a group our “clutteraholics” shared such “dirty little secrets.”

A higher quality of life is not only based on reducing acquisitiveness and possessiveness, but also associated with the meanings of home. In our study, we found a belief that the home is a place for supporting our body, spirit, and relationships. We strive to build up a radiant “heaven-like” home instead of a devilishly chaotic one. Home, in other words, is the place for relaxation, enjoyment, and freedom from panic. Organizing our lives involves not only changing our behaviors, but also adopting a new mindset and attitude toward life. A disorganized home represents a disorganized self and life for the individual, therefore a strong desire for an organized home and the demand for the services of a professional organizer was evident among those who had sought such help. Even the professional organizers studied face some of the same problems as their clients. One of the professional organizers found it hard to believe that she had such a disorganized garage when she intentionally downsized her living space. Within Goffman’s (1959) “backstage” of the self, this organizer found a similar source of embarrassment to that experienced by her clients.

Conclusion

At a descriptive level, we studied material lifestyles and the problem of having too many possessions with too much disorganization for a select group of consumers who have called upon the skills of a professional organizer or are contemplating doing so. We

find that their lives improved, at least temporarily, when they did so. They felt better about themselves and their environment after at least partially de-cluttering their lives. At a theoretical level, we are concerned with how clutter becomes a problem and with the deeper symbolic meanings of clutter and chaos. The metaphor of house as body and the accumulated clutter as feces gives us an interesting and useful way of thinking about the relationship between our possessions and happiness. An extremely materialistic person believes that having things or not having things is the primary source of happiness or unhappiness in life. The irony is that people who are more materialistic tend to be less happy and less satisfied with their lives. Since many of the things we own create a burden of caring for, maintaining, storing, and ultimately disposing of these things, we can see that people's unhappiness is highly associated with materialism. Finally, with our increasing inventories of possessions within our homes and the increasing frustration and panic likely to result from the clutter and chaos of our homes, seeking help from professional organizers is becoming a common phenomenon like hiring an interior designer for decorating the home. A professional organizer not only helps clients to organize their homes, but also releases them from the frustration and panic that surface with the rise of home clutter and chaos. Also, a professional organizer helps their clients throw away their past and rebuild a fresh, new, simplified, and ordered life.

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