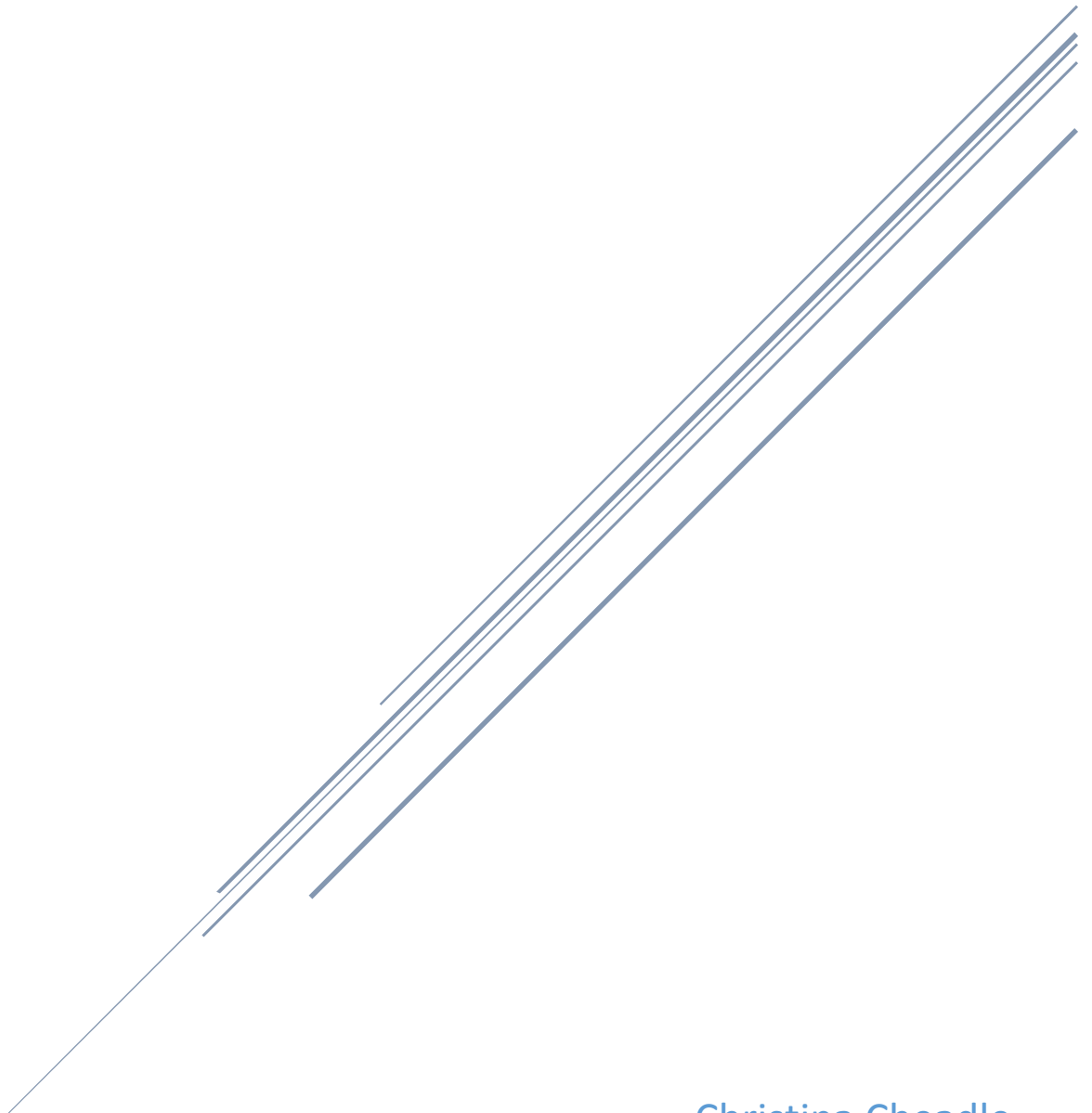


# HOARDING:

Identity Conceptualization through Objects and its Exploitation in the Media



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Anthropology Capstone

Over the past decade, television viewers have been accosted with vast numbers of hoarding narratives. It has become a local phenomenon, from talk show interventions to multi-season television shows, hoarding has become a common phrase among the population today (Lepselter 2011, 920). The reasons behind hoarding, however, tend to possess less concrete information. In 2013, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (DSM-V) added hoarding as a disorder due to its distinct features as an illness with separate methods of treatment (Association 2013). Those suffering from hoarding disorder possess a “persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of the value others may attribute to these possessions” (Association 2013). A psychological perspective of the disability provides a foundation upon which an anthropological perspective can build. An anthropological analysis of hoarding allows a deeper look into the culture of consumption that the modern age so fosters. Distributed personhood and Colin Campbell’s theory of modern autonomous imaginative hedonism provide lenses through which I believe we should analyze this disability in order to effectively manage and treat it (Campbell 1987, 77).

After I analyze hoarding through an anthropological lens, I argue that popularized hoarding literature and television shows distort the reality of hoarding in order to stigmatize those who hoard and latently have them act as a warning to the viewers/readers about overconsumption and conforming to societal norms. Mental illness in reality television has been discussed at length (Escoffery 2006; Shawn M. Phillips 2012), however the literature of this nature in relation to A&E’s *Hoarders* or similar shows that claim to help those suffering from mental illnesses is less prevalent. Through my research, this facet of the entertainment industry became blatantly clear and is disturbing to me. A quick internet search of reviews of the television show *Hoarders*, finds quotes such as, “it’s a lurid, desperate source of inspiration,

seasoned with voyeuristic sensationalism” (“Hoarders | TV Review” 2016), and “preying on someone who is ‘clearly mentally ill’” (Sadie Whitelocks 2016). These are mixed among the advertised quotes from A&E with statements such as, “compelling” (Entertainment Weekly), “Emmy-nominated” (A&E.com), and “Have to see it to believe it” (Chicago Tribune). These people suffering from a sometimes debilitating lifestyle are being exploited through this television show, and allowing A&E to then brag about its “Emmy-nominated” series. Looking at this series using Guy Debord’s idea of the spectacle (1994) allow viewers to think about it more critically and see the show for what it is: exploitation of the ‘other’ for means of entertainment.

With this conceptualization of hoarding disorder in mind, it makes *Hoarders*, increasingly disturbing. This show essentially highlights the lives of those who function outside of the normal limits of society and use it for entertainment and monetary claim. For example, on a website meant to be accessible to those who seek help for this disorder, it advertises the show, claiming that it is “literally the best thing ever” (<http://anxietytreatmentexperts.com>). In order to highlight the derogatory aspects of the show, I utilize Erving Goffman’s classic idea of stigma to classify what shows such as *Hoarders* do to the people featured on the show through careful articulation of the ways in which they deviate from society. Previous literature uses similar theory to defend the way that the mentally ill are portrayed such as Shawn M. Phillips, *The Most Dangerous Deviants in America* (2012). Throughout these analyses, I frame my argument through the idea of the spectacle, or what Guy Debord theorized to be, “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord 2000). Reality television has filled the void that side shows once offered in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, allowing viewers to ogle at the deviant and stigmatized whilst clarifying the dichotomy between societal norms and societal abnorms (Marechal 2012).

For this project, I researched previous literature on hoarding, as discussed above, as well as watched *Hoarders*, a show created by A&E and similar to one created by TLC entitled *Hoarders: Buried Alive*. I conducted no personal interviews for this paper for logistical reasons, but did not feel my research to be hindered by this fact. Through my research into hoarding, I came across patterns in the narrative of hoarders in America that I have not seen addressed in hoarding literature. Firstly, hoarding is considered to be a mental illness, yet a television show exists where these mentally ill victims of hoarding disorder are documented for the viewers' entertainment. While *Hoarders* seems as though it seeks to help the hoarder, unrealistic expectations and ridiculous tactics are put in place in order to keep the show entertaining. Secondly, and most interestingly, the show almost exclusively focuses on members of a social status outside what is considered normal, oftentimes conveying the illness to be one that affects those who are unable to adhere to the arbitrary rules of society. The show does not discuss the wealthy and/or successful hoarders who either seek help privately or are able to hide their hoarding tendencies behind extra houses and building in which they keep their hoards. I argue that American popular culture frames the disorder in such a way that a socioeconomic stigma has become attached to the disability. I encourage viewers of shows such as *Hoarders* to maintain a critical eye and see through the propagandistic portrayal of these individuals.

Each episode of *Hoarders* begins the same way. The intro introduces each of the two hoarders upon which the current episode focuses. It does so with scratchy lettering on a black background, thrown up on the screen amongst a drum beat reminiscent of a scene out of a horror film. The viewer is then informed, in the same manner, that "more than 3 million Americans are compulsive hoarders" and "these are two of their stories" (A&E.com). At this point, the audience is introduced to the hoarders in the show. Oftentimes, these hoarders are frumpily dressed and

appear uneducated through the use of improper grammar. Their children and friends, contrastingly, often look put together. Frequent yelling breaks out among family members, with an episode rarely passing without some form of fight. The show is considered a reality-drama, and producers ensure the drama exists whether or not the families provide it. For example, the show has a three-day time frame that is inflexible in even the most tenuous of circumstances. For example, in season four: episode four, a man named Roy makes the viewer question the show's goals of helping the hoarders. In this episode, Roy struggles with a compulsive desire to keep the cars to which he is so attached and that are littered throughout his yard. The city of Santa Cruz is fining him by the day and the show emphasizes the time crunch in which Roy resides. Unfortunately, it rains heavily each day that the de-clutterers are there, physically preventing them from removing cars. While watching this episode, I found the drama to be created, as the producers could have waited until the rain subsided and offered Roy true help. Instead, they left Roy after the allotted three days, without having offered him much help at all.

While viewing *Hoarders*, it would appear that hoarding often affects the poor and uneducated classes of society more than others. Some episodes of *Hoarders*, do, however, focus on the wealthier suffers from the disorder. For example, season four: episode two took place in a large house in Beverly Hills. Even within this episode, however, the family was described in ways that do not adhere to the norms of society. The hoarder, Jean, was raising her 8-year-old granddaughter, even though the mother of the child, Jean's daughter, lived with Jean as well. The daughter appeared to be incapacitated as a mother by a mental illness such as depression. This episode made clear that this family struggled to adhere to the social norms placed upon them by society, such as living without one's parents as an adult. Season four: episode four also focuses on a rather wealthy woman, Loretta, who hoards items such as nice furniture and clothing.

Through a series of emotional breakdowns, tears, and screaming fights with her relatives, however, it is made clear that Loretta also does not follow social norms in ways other than just her hoarding tendencies. Loretta appears very emotionally unstable and on edge, and eventually refuses the help of the show.

More prevalent on *Hoarders* are people such as Carol or Vicki. Season four: episode six focuses on a woman named Carol who lives out of a truck filled with trash parked outside her home due to its uninhabitability. The central drama, in the show's typical race-to-the-clock fashion, revolves around the fact that the city is set to evict her if she does not remove the hoard. Carol, however, does not seem to be able to handle the main psychologist who helps the hoarders seemingly defeat their mental illness. Dr. Robin Zasio stars in every episode of *Hoarders* and has her own clinic in northern California dedicated to helping hoarders. The webpage for the clinic (<http://anxietytreatmentexperts.com>) even features the show *Hoarders* quoting it as "literally the best thing ever" and "excellent and amazing. And terrifying and painful." With her long blond hair, made-up face, and thin body which is emphasized by her form fitting clothing, Dr. Zasio is beautiful by conventional American standards, and seems to fit in front of the camera. Her appearance often provides a stark contrast to both the houses and the clients with which she deals. In this case, Carol could not get over Zasio's well-kept appearance and would say things such as "haven't you ever cleaned stuff up? Apparently, not, you just buy it, huh?" In the end, Carol refused help because she felt that Zasio was too condescending and Carol could not get past Zasio's appearance. Meanwhile, Carol's clothing and use of colloquial language insinuated her socioeconomic status and education level to the viewers, whether or not it was accurate in its reflection.

Vicki from season four: episode five stays with the producer's theme of lower class victims of hoarding. Vicki, like Carol, did not respond well to the help offered by Zasio, and would frequently verbally lash out. The show also recorded Vicki taking her teenage son dumpster diving with her in order to obtain more items for the house. While it may seem that *Hoarders* was simply documenting her life, I find it hard to believe that she just happened to be dumpster diving the day the cameras came. Instead, it appeared as a ploy to make the episode more entertaining through making Vicki look more pathetic. The hoarders on these shows can be characterized as being conveyed as "white trash," drowning in literal garbage (Gael Sweeney 1996). In her essay, *The King of White Trash Culture: Elvis Presley and the Aesthetics of Excess*, Sweeney defines members of the "white trash class" as "the rejects of mainstream society: White Trash is an unwritten, folk aesthetic, the true American Primitive" (1996, 250). *Hoarders* portrays hoarders as primitive members of this white trash class.

Another episode that exaggerated the drama in order to provide entertainment in a way that exploited the hoarder is season four: episode two. In this episode, Billy Bob finds so much value in his items that he swears that if he sold them all he would make a huge profit and therefore the decluttering team should not throw it all away. In order to prove their point, the team humiliates him on television by hosting a garage sale. When nothing sells, the team tells him over and over that the items he so values are actually worthless. This scene was both painful to watch, and disturbing to someone analyzing it. I found no value in the humiliating garage sale, and thought it to be a further warning to viewers about the lack of monetary value of clutter.

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Before I analyze the previous examples through an anthropological lens, I must address the previous research on the subject, much of which is psychologically based. While hoarding

disorder used to be associated as an offshoot of OCD due to its seemingly compulsive nature, it has since been characterized as separate since hoarding behaviors can appear in people with many different kind of disorders such as depression or compulsive buying (Portero et al. 2015). While compulsive buying and compulsive hoarding may appear to go hand in hand, the sources of gratification for their sufferers are different. The compulsive buyer achieves gratification through the buying process itself, not necessarily through the knowledge of their possession of that object and therefore do not struggle with deaccessioning to the extent that hoarders do (O'Guinn and Faber 1989). Hoarders, while they may compulsively buy in order to maintain their hoard, receive satisfaction from the actual possession of the objects. They are both seen as compulsive disorders, however, since they both stem from the fact that the sufferers believe that an "individual can temporarily escape negative feelings through fantasies of personal success and social acceptance while engaging in the particular behavior" (Jacobs 1986).

From a psychological perspective, compulsive consumption behaviors are categorized as "excessive and ritualistic behaviors designed to alleviate tension, anxiety, or discomfort aroused by an obtrusive thought or obsession" (O'Guinn and Faber 1989, 147). These compulsive actions offer ways for people to live out fantasies of a more fulfilling existence. Someone who compulsively buys might fantasize about personal and social success while engaging in the behavior. Studies conducted on compulsive buyers found that those suffering from this affliction have lower self-esteem and a higher propensity for fantasy than those without the condition (O'Guinn and Faber 1989, 155). Additionally, in a 1989 study, psychologists found that compulsive buyers exhibited more envy and non-generosity than other consumers (O'Guinn and Faber 1989, 155). Those who compulsively hoard often possess the same patterns and tendencies. For example, hoarders sometimes may view themselves as someone more successful



then their family or community members perceive them as being and therefore not reach out for help. This compulsive behavior of hoardings relieves the anxiety and helps them engage in a fantasy of a better life. Hoarders have a compulsion to continue to hoard, even if it threatens their livelihoods because the thought of how they might feel if losing the hoard is worse to them than anything else they could imagine.

The psychological world treats hoarding as a disorder of degree, placing everyone on a spectrum, even those non-afflicted by the disorder in any salient way (Portero et al. 2015). This allows psychologists to run experiments involving non-hoarders and still draw conclusions about hoarding disorder. Because of this, the symptoms of the disability are characterized as magnified versions of common behaviors, instead of unique behaviors caused by outside factors.

Psychological analysis, however, is a necessary component to comprehending this debilitating disability. It is important to note that most scientific experiments done with respect to hoarding work with the disorder on a theoretical level. Many of the populations tested are not comprised of hoarders but instead are made up of non-hoarders who are tested for hoarding tendencies.

According to the psychological literature, hoarding symptoms are considered to be dimensional, meaning that everyone possesses them to a certain degree and the single symptoms can be analyzed independently of other ones (Portero et al. 2015, 280). This method provides significant anthropological limitations as hoarding manifests due to deeper-seeded identity-related insecurities and therefore should not be measured and analyzed in populations that may not struggle with said insecurities.

Psychologists appear to agree that hoarding disorder or symptoms of hoarding disorder stem from inability to deal with feelings of discomfort in socially acceptable ways (Shaw et al. 2015; Portero et al. 2015; Phung et al. 2015). Considering this definition, however, it is

intriguing that hoarding seems to be a fairly recent disability to the best of our understanding, leading me to hypothesize that the hoarding disorder has more to do with socio-cultural conflict than previously thought. If the psychological reasons for hoarding were true, one would expect the disorder to be more prevalent through time and cross-culturally (Eve Zaunbrecher 2015). While hoarding can be found cross-culturally, it has not been found in many cultures, particularly ones typically considered undeveloped, or at the very least there have not been studies conducted in these countries. A study by P.J Phung et al. connected hoarding disorder with the inability to properly emotionally regulate (Phung et al. 2015). While I believe that this study construed many important insights into the disorder, it would be useful for investigators to consider the contemporaneity of the disability, and the seemingly exclusiveness of it to industrialized societies. The focus on anxiety sensitivity, distress tolerance, and negative urgency as key causes of hoarding behaviors is still important, nonetheless.

According to psychologists Phung et al (2015: 2), “Anxiety sensitivity...refers to the fear of arousal-related sensations due to mistaken beliefs that these sensations lead to negative consequences.” Additionally, distress tolerance is defined as “the capacity to experience and withstand negative psychological states, and captures the intolerance of, absorption in, negative appraisals of, and higher need to regulate, the distress associated with negative emotions” while negativity urgency “is a facet of impulsivity pertaining to the tendency to perform rash or regrettable actions in order to alleviate negative emotional states” (Phung et al. 2015, 3). A toxic combination of uncommon balances of these three factors triggers individuals to be more susceptible to hoarding than others.

However, many people’s inability to deal with stress and anxiety manifests itself in myriad ways other than hoarding. An anthropological lens helps to fill in the gaps left by

psychological studies. In individuals with hoarding disorder, it is hypothesized that their brains have been conditioned to regulate their emotions through attachments to objects (Phung et al. 2015). By substituting ‘healthy’ coping strategies with object possession, oftentimes as emotional states weaken the connections with objects strengthen until eventually hoarders are unable to cope at all without their objects. To hoarders, the acquisition of objects serves as an “emotional crutch” until they are no longer able to function without them (Phung et al. 2015, 7). This differs from those who simply clutter or maintain messy lives; without the hoard, the hoarder feels that he or she cannot function and loses his or her identity as a result. This becomes a problem when the hoard also prevents the hoarder from maintaining what society deems acceptable levels or normal living standards.

William James’ Psychology: The Briefer Course discusses identity as created from awareness of four distinct concepts: agency, distinctness, continuity, and reflection (James 2009). Any disruption in these four concepts, James posits, hinders one’s ability to function. For example, someone who struggles to find awareness of their self-agency over life events may suffer from depression. Those with autism spectrum disorders may find it difficult maintaining a sense of personal continuity and distinctness (Skirrow et al. 2015, 281). Individuals with hoarding disorder may have a hard time retaining awareness of self-continuity, thereby formulating a sense of continuity through the objects in their possession. Additionally, imagination helps to create a sense of continuity helping to further solidify the individual’s identity. The cultural climate, however, takes these objective circumstances and pushes someone toward becoming a hoarder. Surrounded by a culture composed of a “generation of longing” created by the consumer revolution, it becomes easy for one struggling with identity to construct oneself through the objects one possesses (Campbell 1987, 85).

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Psychological explanations of hoarding offer some key insights into the disorder, but much remains to be understood. Implementing an anthropological lens helps to more holistically understand this contemporary and debilitating affliction and adds to the repertoire of insight useful in assisting hoarders. I hypothesize that hoarding disorder was facilitated by the consumer revolution and the growth of technology. Oftentimes, epochs are categorized by the developments in transportation and technology; the mid to late 18th century grew vastly in both. These changes emanated into every facet of society, including consumerism. Historically, hoarding seems not as common as it is today, with an estimated 5-6% of the American population being affected by the disorder (Portero et al. 2015). In fact, I struggled to find any evidence of historical hoarding manifesting in the same ways as modern-day hoarding. Looking at interdisciplinary papers and books, nowhere did an author mention historical hoarding, nor was I able to find any examples on my own. Additionally, hoarding is less common in non-capitalist and/or developing societies (Cefalu 2015). Sociologist Colin Campbell articulates this change in consumer culture as a change in the nature of demand into an internally-located desire (Campbell 1987, 18). This provides a contrast to the way most theorists or historians understand the consumer revolution as externally-driven. The consumer revolution is often characterized as an increased desire to consume in order to “keep up with the Joneses.”(Campbell 1987, 17). The industrial revolution provided the common person with a new surplus of money that led to a desire to purchase new goods. Sociologist Harold Perkins makes the important distinction between 18<sup>th</sup> century people’s ability to make new purchases and people’s willingness to do so (Campbell 1987, 19). Campbell attributes this “increased propensity to consume” to an internal force, fixed more on the desire to obtain rather than the consumption itself (Campbell 1987, 19).

When applied to hoarding, sociologist Colin Campbell's book The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism offers insight into this disability from a perspective based in social science. The consumer revolution led to what he refers to as "modern autonomous imaginative hedonism" (Campbell 1987). Campbell believes that hedonism has evolved into an internal-pleasure seeking based in one's own imagination. He states that while "day-dreaming works to generate the pleasurable imaginative experiences from which desire is created, wanting also generates that dissatisfaction with reality" (Campbell 1987, 95). Additionally, through the act of attainment or consumption this becomes less pleasurable than imagining. This type of mentality created a permanent desiring mode, which, when acted upon, can morph into a debilitating disability such as hoarding.

Capitalist societies now live in a world laden with consumerism and advertising. Ads for products feature examples of how life could be if only the consumer possessed the advertised product. Capitalism has provided those with the financial means seemingly endless choices when it comes to consumption. The industrial revolution and the consumer revolution went hand in hand, with consumers spurred by the idealistic need to imagine the pleasures gained through consumption in order to improve one's own lifestyle. According to Campbell, modern hedonism exists when "individuals employ their imaginative and creative powers to construct mental images which they consume for the intrinsic pleasure they provide, a practice best described as day-dreaming or fantasizing" (Campbell 1987, 77). An era characterized by mass consumption created a society in which hoarding could manifest and thrive.

I hypothesize that hoarding develops when the individual discovers that consumption is a disillusioning experience at its core, but still finds the prospect of future consumption enticing. The actual function of the product matters less than the role it plays in the elaborate fantasy the

hoarder possesses in his or her own mind. The average or non-compulsive consumer may fall prey to advertising schemes, purchasing a product with the hopes that it will improve one's standard of living. Eventually, however, the consumer will reach a point where the reality of the acquisition of the new product does not outweigh the potential the ideal offers them. For the hoarder, however, there is a struggle to balance societal norms and their imagined self. The imaginative hedonism overwhelms the hoarder to the point that the maintenance of the daydream supersedes all else in matters of importance, sometimes even compared to the health and safety of themselves and their children.

While Campbell references daydreaming as a common occurrence, hoarders take this form of imaginative hedonism and base their identities upon the daydream, thus forming themselves through the objects they possess and concept referred to as distributed personhood (Fowler 2010). Cultural anthropologist Chris Fowler states, "ordinary persons operate in a known field of relations, which are made manifest in their bodies, objects, buildings, and gardens" (Fowler 2010, 370). This definition means that a person's concept of identity lies in their awareness of the the world surrounding them and the feelings of wholeness that this world facilitates. Personhood is used to describe the state of being a person in relation to discussions of identity and states of being (Fowler 2010).

From this concept of personhood, anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss (2000), Marilyn Strathern (1990) and Alfred Gell (1998) have formulated the idea of distributed personhood. Distributed personhood implies that the individual's identity is not housed within the body, but is instead divisible into multiple material parts (Mauss 2000, 66). This term helps to facilitate and understanding of a hoarder's concept of themselves. When a hoarder hesitates to throw something away because they are afraid that they will be simultaneously "throwing out part of

themselves,” they are exhibiting qualities of distributed personhood (Lepselter 2011, 923). A hoarder has vested his or her identity in the hoard, thereby imagining it as part of his or herself. Through placing one identity in a hoard of objects based on imaginative pleasure, the hoarder’s struggle morphs into a disability. For example, in the situation with Billy Bob and the garage sale, emphasizing the lack of sales was akin to telling him that the materials in which he instills his sense of identity are worthless.

To give some additional examples of hoarding disorder, I turn to anthropologist Susan Lepselter. In her article *The Disorder of Things: Hoarding Narratives in Popular Media*, she refers to a case of a woman who finds a rotting pumpkin in her house after an unknown period of time and is reluctant to part with it (Lepselter 2011, 940). At the last moment she decides to take seeds from the rotting pumpkin, claiming that she will plant them in order to grow a new pumpkin just like the old one which she recalls with fond memories of its perfection (Lepselter 2011, 741). This act epitomizes the hedonism of a compulsive hoarder’s behavior in relation to their distributed personhood. In order to alleviate the anxiety associated with throwing something out and therefore losing a part of her identity, this hoarder keeps something that allows her to recreate what she once had. Everyone involved in the situation believes that she will not, in fact, ever plant the seeds and grow another pumpkin, but by keeping the seeds she maintains the part of her identity classified as ‘good pumpkin possessor’ thus perpetuating the original imagined and idiosyncratically valued identity. While this quality may appear silly or unimportant to those not suffering from a compulsion, for someone who has an insecure identity taking away any part of it induces anxiety and panic. Hoarders have conceptualized their identities and understand their personhood as being distributed through their possessions which bring them pleasure through imagined use.

Lepselter also discusses the variation involved with hoarders (2011). For example, while some people hoard in order to maintain an illusion of the past, others do so in order to prepare for a potential future event. Many hoarders seem to have an insecure relationship to chronological time, however, instigated by an apprehensive comprehension of their own identities (Lepselter 2011, 926). When encouraged to throw out seemingly useless pills, a hoarder named Richie claims “it brings me that memory of what my mom prescribed me and—get for me. Her caring for me” (Lepselter 2011, 936). The pills signify the mother’s memory and therefore her existence and affection she extended him. By getting rid of the pills, Richie would experience the loss of his mother yet again; he would lose her imagined presence that he has been maintaining through his possessions. He has imprinted part of his identity within the pills, and they represent the loving relationship that he once had with his mother and still desires to possess. Not all hoarders focus on their identities in terms of the future and what could be, but some such as Richie conceptualize their identities through memories related to the past.

This argument has been moving forward on the following societal assumption: hoarding is not the societal norm. While part of this capstone argues that hoarders conceptualize themselves differently rather than wrongly, unfortunately the restrictions placed upon these people by society frequently make it difficult to continue living up to society’s standards. The ensuing struggle is part of the reason that hoarders feel compelled to be featured on *Hoarders*; it offers them access to help that they may not otherwise be able to afford at the price of the exploitation of their dysfunctional lifestyles. At Zasio’s compulsive hoarding treatment center, a full program may be covered by insurance, but the cost of removing the hoard from the house may cost thousands of dollars (Sadie Whitelocks 2016). Furthermore, oftentimes the wealthy can afford to buy additional storage for their hoard, sometimes going as far as to buy additional



houses. Therefore, while these people may suffer from the same disorder as those featured on *Hoarders*, they are not incapacitated by it due to their economic abilities. For example, the Reeves Collection at Washington and Lee University was bequeathed by the wealthy Reeves family in 1967. Euchlin Reeves and his wife, Louise Herreshoff, amassed so much stuff during their years travelling and collecting that they bought the house next to theirs in order to store it, thereby they were able to maintain moral order and prevent stigmatization. This is not unheard of amongst avid collectors; however, without the means to buy extra property in which to store their collections it is interesting to think how their compulsive collecting would manifest itself.

In her book, *The Hoarder in You*, Dr. Robin Zasio, a hoarding specialist, brings several of her patients into the discussion in order to illustrate their thought process. While she does not use terms such as “imaginative hedonism” and “personhood” to describe the hoarders’ states of mind, her examples support my thesis. Oftentimes, hoarders see themselves in the objects around them, thus constructing their identities through their possessions. The case of Jennifer, a woman with grown children, epitomizes this idea (Zasio 2012, 10). After Jennifer’s mother died, her hoarding rapidly escalated until it had been two years since she could see her floor. After days of clearing out the hoard with the help of Zasio, a mass of destroyed Barbie dolls was found. These toys were from Jennifer’s childhood, and she associated them with memories of happiness. Like many hoarders, through trying to keep the hoard and thus preserve their distributed identities through the memories and potential the hoard provides, their objects to fall into disrepair. The imagination becomes more powerful than the reality to the point that the objects do not have to be usable in order to provide pleasure; the knowledge that they exist is enough.

Hoarders also often struggle with the “just in case” justification for their continual hoarding behaviors. Zasio describes the case of Kate, who amassed piles of brand new clothes in

sizes that would never fit her (Zasio 2012, xii). Kate says that she saves these clothes because even though they do not currently fit, they may eventually so she keeps them “just in case” (Zasio 2012, xiii). Like many hoarders, Kate’s personhood has been distributed throughout the objects she owns. The clothes represent the Kate she once was or may someday be, and therefore Kate sees herself represented in the objects. Throwing away some of her hoard would be akin to throwing away part of herself. Campbell draws attention to these issues in his discussion on the spirit of modern consumerism. He claims that the desire for objects stems from the “pleasurable dramas which [the consumers] have already enjoyed in imagination” and this then leads to a sense of disillusionment because these day-dreams never come to fruition and these people look to next imagined consumer pleasure (Campbell 1987, 90). Kate looks at her hoard and imagines other versions of her, but she cannot deny the observation that her lifestyle does not fit within society’s norm. Kate is deviant, and therefore has been pressured to believe that she needs to change her ways in order to realign with the norms of society. Oftentimes it is at this point when specialists such as Zasio are called in because the hoarder realizes that his or her situation has become dangerous or problematic.

While understanding one’s identity through objects exchanged with others serves as a basis to many cultures as emphasized in Mauss’ The Gift (2000), American culture has deemed the ability to let go of many of these objects with relatively little difficulty a social norm. Sentimentality in relation to objects is acceptable within socially constructed limits. *Hoarders* allow us to see what happens when we allow our autonomous imaginative hedonism to overtake our adherence to social norms, thus causing us to place too much of ourselves into the objects we own. Television shows depicting these hoarders place fear into viewers and encourage them to

continue to adhere to social norms and maintain a hold on our consumption or end up as pathetic as these hoarders are conveyed to be through media.

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An understanding of Erving Goffman's idea of stigma helps to propel my argument that *Hoarders* exploits those suffering from hoarding disorder and creates an inaccurate picture of hoarding. In his 1963 work, Stigma, Goffman defines stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (1986, 3). He continues on to say that “an attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another” (Goffman 1986, 3). Transposed onto hoarding, this concept implies that the hoarders are the stigmatized and the viewers the usual. *Hoarders* portrays the people featured on the show as malfunctioning members of society. Oftentimes their houses, spousal relationships, and children are on the line because the hoarders have been unable to adhere to what society deems normal in order to maintain them. This stigma, misrepresentative of hoarders as a whole, then discredits the hoarder as a contributing or normal member of society. As previously mentioned, this view of hoarding and hoarders misrepresents those who conceptualizes themselves through their possessions as a whole, by only showing those who do so to such an extreme extent that their lives are significantly impaired. Hoarding affects a wide range of people, but *Hoarders* chooses to focus on those who will provide the most entertainment for the viewers—those on the brink of getting their houses or children taken away. This stigmatizes these sufferers further as it perpetuates the idea of the disorder as one that affects those who do not obey the norms of the society in which they live.

Goffman's theories also align with the concepts of distributed personhood and modern autonomous hedonism as applied to hoarding. Upon suggesting that a discrepancy may exist between an individual's virtual and actual identity, he claims, “this discrepancy, when known

about or apparent, spoils his social identity; it has the effect of cutting him off from society and from himself so that he stands a discredited person facing an unaccepting world” (1986, 19). Additionally, “society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories”(Goffman 1986, 2). *Hoarders*, makes this discrepancy between the hoarders virtual and actual identities apparent through reality television, but does so in a way that further stigmatizes the hoarder by creating a spectacle of them and their disorder rather than more accurately and thoroughly documenting the potentially mundane reality of it.

Characters such as Vicki, Ron, and Carol, as discussed previously are exploited as spectacles for the benefit of viewers and producers, but arguably not their own. The time constraints the show provides for these hoarders give them unrealistic and unnecessary limitations for them to completely reconceptualize their identities. The show provides the hoarders funds to get help afterwards as well, but forcing them to upset their personhoods so drastically and in front of millions of viewers is disturbing. Viewing hoarding through an anthropological lens then makes the television show more exploitative and inappropriate. If the producers created the show to help hoarders, they would do so in a more holistic manner, shying away from the time constraints and the pigeonholed cast of sufferers. A more thorough view of the spectrum of people who suffer from hoarding and treatment directed at helping the hoarders establish their personhoods through means other than possessions would be a more effective way to truly help them.

Hoarding has become increasingly popular with two shows currently running on television and several books recently published on the subject. The contemporaneity of this disorder lies in the assumption that the consumer revolution bred a level of insatiable

consumption with which those suffering from hoarding disorder struggle. The modern consumer has been described as someone who “when one want is fulfilled, several more usually pop up to take its place” (Campbell 1987, 37). It becomes easier to understand that hoarders can be seen as compulsive consumers. Campbell theorizes that this new form of consumption has created modern autonomous imaginative hedonism, meaning that a generation of longing-derived pleasure has been created and the modern consumer now gains pleasure from imagining never-ending consumption (by thinking about the next consumer item) more than from actually consuming. Hoarders take this idea a step further by not only living in the day dream of unending consumption, but also forming their identity through the objects that they own, a concept known as distributed personhood (Fowler 2010). Today’s consumer climate has created a perfect storm for those with a propensity to hoard, and the contemporaneity of the disorder denotes that the utilities of the social sciences complement psychological explanations.

*Hoarders* misrepresents hoarders as disabled, uneducated members of the lower classes. This perpetuates stigmas against hoarders, making them a point of entertainment and pity. They have been stigmatized by these shows meant to try to “help compulsive hoarders every Monday at 9 p.m. ET on A&E” (Hughes 2016). *Hoarders* as a popular television show helps to reinforce the societal norms of living in a clean, well-kept house by showing not only the extreme situations to which not doing so can lead, but by conveying the types of people that maintain this lifestyle as undesirables. Zasio’s book on hoarding is even presenting as a self-help book, teaching readers how to live their best, cleanest lives, while comparing negative tendencies to the same ones that hoarders possess (Zasio 2012). Even the title of her book, The Hoarder in You: How to Live a Happier, Healthier, Uncluttered Life, makes clear to the reader what the desired behavior is in order to be aligned with the societal norms.

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Supplementing psychological explanations for hoarding with a perspective rooted in social science offers a deeper level of understanding that can hopefully be used to better treat the illness. A focus on the contemporaneity of the illness can draw attention to the importance of a sufferer's surroundings in the assessment of his or her disorder. Viewing the hoarders vision of his or herself as conceptualized through distributed personhood into objects can help psychologists better and more accurately treat sufferers. Further study can look more deeply into hoarding cross-culturally, specifically in non-industrialized societies. Hoarding has been thoroughly documented in countries such as Japan and Australia, and it could prove fruitful to more thoroughly investigate any differences between hoarders in these countries (Eve Zaunbrecher 2015). Additionally, as Zasio states in her book, hoarding tendencies affect all of us, and an awareness of our propensity to succumb to our autonomous imaginative hedonism can help the modern consumer avoid the disillusionment associated with consumption (Zasio 2012).

In the last several decades, hoarding disorder has come to the forefront in the form of television shows and other forms of mass media. Oftentimes these mediums distort the disorder as a latent means of creating a dichotomy that clearly defines an 'other' thus encouraging viewers to not succumb to the ways of the 'other.' Hoarders should not be stigmatized or viewed as deviants. Instead, we as a society should understand that they distribute their personhood to a degree that sometimes makes it hard to adhere to the rest of society. This anthropological analysis of hoarding can help us further understand this debilitating disorder and help those suffering from it. It also can make consumers reflect on the spectacle created by reality television shows, and question whether or not these shows exploit or help the people featured on them.

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