



## **Who and Where?**

### **Researching Different Clutter Experiences by Adult Subgroups and Varied Environments**

**By**

**Helena Lucia Swanson and Devki A. Patel**

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#### **Executive Summary:**

Clutter is a problem that plagues almost everyone. With clutter being such a widespread experience, it is crucial to understand why people keep their items and how keeping objects impacts people negatively. Throughout this paper, we report the results of seven (7) research projects providing a deeper understanding of people's experiences with clutter. More specifically, we dive into what phenomena are related to clutter, why people keep their clutter, how clutter impacts people, and how different people may be impacted differently by their clutter. In addition to highlighting people's experiences with clutter supported by research findings, we detail how these results may be incorporated into interventions by organizing and productivity professionals.

#### **Problem Statement:**

Clutter experts Dr. Catherine Roster of the University of New Mexico and Rev. Dr. Joseph Ferrari of DePaul University defined clutter as "an overabundance of possessions that collectively create chaotic and disorderly living spaces" (Roster et al., 2016, para. 1). Helena Lucia Swanson and Devki A. Patel, recipients of the 2022 Institute for Challenging Disorganization Student Research Grants, are graduate students in Dr. Ferrari's research lab. Devki and Helena sought to answer multiple clutter questions by using archival data from Dr. Ferrari's research lab. Consistent with this paper's title, our overall research questions for the seven projects were who experiences clutter problems more than their counterparts and where do people report having clutter problems?

## Background:

The over-accumulation of personal possessions (labeled 'clutter') has obvious physical or environmental consequences, such as impeding the utility of a room or reducing mobility within one's home (Roster et al. 2016). In the United States specifically, a recent poll found that 50% of Americans feel overwhelmed by the amount of "stuff" in their homes. The survey, conducted by the selling app Mercari, also reported an average of 42 unused items amounting to an average of \$723 per household, with women holding onto unused items more frequently than men. The pervasiveness of clutter-related issues may also be approximated using popular culture discussions on clutter, as well as media offerings on the subject.

The process of over-accumulating items varies greatly because of individual personality differences, situational factors, and past disposition and disposal behavior (Ferrari et al., 2021; Cross et al., 2017). Past research on clutter within the home and office focuses on personality and demographic indicators as predictors of clutter (Ferrari et al. 2018; Ferrari & Roster, 2018). The first three-part study (researchers: Helena, Mareta, & Lili) examined individual-level variables such as age and income to better understand how parts of our identity are related to clutter outcomes. The second three-part study (researchers: Abby, Ella, Hetal, & Alyssa) considered novel environments in which clutter occurs and the psychological processes behind managing disorganized personal possessions in these unique temporal and physical contexts.

## Methodology & Results

### Who?

**Seniors with Stuff: Older Adults and Clutter.** The purpose of this project was to understand different clutter experiences by age, specifically looking at different experiences for adults  $\leq 64$  and  $\geq 65$ . Two datasets were utilized for this project. One dataset was collected in 2015, we will reference this dataset with the name "2015 Clutter Dataset" (N = 1354). The second dataset was collected in 2020 and is called "Decluttering During COVID Dataset" (N = 229). It is advantageous to review two different datasets because they were collected in two very different time periods and may be used to provide insight into pre-COVID and during-COVID clutter experiences. See Table 1 for the 2015 Clutter Dataset and Decluttering During COVID Dataset demographic information. Among the two datasets, data on the following scales were collected: Clutter Quality of Life (CQLS, Roster, 2016), Product-Self Extension (Ferraro et al., 2011), Place Attachment (Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989), and the 'What's My Motivation To' Questionnaire (Sheldon, 2015). The results concluded there were no differences in the 2015 Clutter Dataset by age groups for Product Self-Extension, CQLS Livability of Space, CQLS Emotional, and CQLS Financial. Further analysis revealed that for the 2015 Clutter Dataset, only one of the CQLS subscales, Social, was significantly different by age group,  $t = 2.489$ ,  $p = .013$ . This result indicates that in 2015, younger adults reported more negative social

impact from their clutter compared to older adults while older adults reported statistically significantly more place attachment than their younger adult counterparts,  $t = -3.079$ ,  $p = .002$ . However, analysis of the Decluttering During COVID Dataset revealed there were no CQLS differences between younger adults and older adults during COVID, providing evidence that the pandemic may be an equalizer for people of different age groups and their clutter experiences; which may be a result of the change in behaviors around socialization and amount of time spent at home during the initial stage of the pandemic. There were no reported differences between younger adults and older adults about their motivations to declutter.

As we approach the end of the pandemic and behaviors return to pre-pandemic norms, it may be important when working with younger adults to address how their clutter may be impacting their social life as that seems to be a major contributor to negative quality of life as a result of clutter. Additionally, when working with older adults, decluttering experts would benefit from understanding how place attachment affects older adults and their experiences with clutter.

**There's Just Too Much Stuff: Office Clutter by Remote Employees.** The purpose of this project was to analyze remote employees' experiences with clutter and how clutter may impact their work. Data for this project were collected in 2019 via an online survey system, Prolific Academic. Participants ( $N = 88$ ) were majority middle-aged (24-45 years old,  $n = 52$ , 59.1%), males ( $n = 56$ , 63.6%), working as individual contributors or staff/administrative personnel ( $n = 50$ , 56.8%). For this project, we looked at three variables as reported by remote employees: Office Clutter Impact Scale (3 subscales: workability of space ( $\alpha = .834$ ,  $M = 4.86$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ), emotional ( $\alpha = .934$ ,  $M = 1.31$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ), and social ( $\alpha = .821$ ,  $M = 1.13$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ), Job Satisfaction (Ferguson & Weisman, 1986,  $\alpha = .886$ ), and Adult Inventory Procrastination (AIP,  $\alpha = .892$ ). Contradictory to our hypothesis, we found that for remote employees, job satisfaction positively predicts procrastination for remote workers,  $\beta = .248$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $R^2 = .094$ ; meaning that the more we like our job the more we procrastinate. Further research is necessary to understand why this relationship exists for remote employees, but it may be related to remote employees' ability to be more flexible with their work hours and tasks, which could lead to procrastinating work. We also found that having a private office space with a door or having office space in an active living area (e.g., a living room) resulted in no difference in the rate of clutter in remote employees' offices. Our analysis revealed there is no difference between how remote office clutter impacted remote employees of different job levels (e.g., lower-level, middle management, top management). Furthermore, we found there is no difference in office clutter impact for remote employees based on their remote office description, namely an office in a private space with a door or in an active living area (e.g., living room). In conclusion, interventions geared towards people working from home may look similar regardless of their job title and their office space.

## Where?

**Digital Declutter: Work-Based Electronic Clutter Experiences.** The purpose of this project was to explore the rate and impact of digital clutter in the workplace, including across different income groups. Data for this project were collected in 2019 via an online survey system, Prolific Academic. Participants (N = 360) were majority white (n = 272, 75.6%), 25-35 years old (n = 196, 54.4%), male (n = 190, 52.8%), educated with a Bachelor's degree (n = 273, 75.8%), and had an annual income of \$0-49,999 (n = 213, 59.2%). The variables utilized for this project include a single item "degree of digital clutter" to assess the rate of digital clutter (M = 4.00, SD = 2.91), Motives for Keeping Digital Clutter ( $\alpha = .763$ , M = 3.31, SD = 0.61), Emotional Exhaustion ( $\alpha = .927$ , M = 3.87, SD = 1.49), and Decision Anxiety ( $\alpha = .914$ , M = 2.96, SD = 1.13). The results revealed that digital clutter significantly predicts emotional exhaustion ( $\beta = .382$ ,  $p = .001$ ) but does not predict decision anxiety ( $\beta = .155$ ,  $p = .303$ ),  $R^2 = .053$ . Furthermore, we found that degree of digital clutter, emotional exhaustion, and motives for keeping digital clutter were experienced similarly across income groups, indicating no statistically significant differences. This indicates that an influx of clutter in the workplace is negatively associated with employees' well-being regardless of income.

As such, expanding clutter interventions to address digital clutter, specifically in the workplace, is an important service that organizing and productivity professionals could provide.

**Economic Status with E-waste: Letting Go Depends on Income.** The purpose of this project was to explore the factors that influence the decision to keep electronic waste (i.e., e-waste), including exploring different factors by income status. Data for this project were collected in 2019 via an online survey system, Prolific Academic. Participants (N = 935) were majority male (n = 479, 51.30%), had an annual income of \$40,000+ (n = 507, 55.7%), and were college graduates (n = 469, 51.5%). The variables we analyzed for this study include Personal Norms for Pro-environment (Steg and de Groot, 2010,  $\alpha = .854$ , M = 3.90, SD = 0.95), Knowledge of E-waste (Roster, 2019,  $\alpha = .928$ , M = 4.38, SD = 1.81), and Product Retention Tendency (Haws et al., 2010,  $\alpha = .909$ , M = 4.47, SD = 1.61). The Personal Norms for Pro-environment Scale measures an individual's personal norms and values related to behaving in a pro-environmental way (e.g., recycling, reducing waste, reducing consumer behavior, etc.). When looking at our outcome variables based on income status, participants with higher annual income reported the following: greater knowledge of e-waste and its negative environmental impact (M = 4.68, SD = 1.75), greater product retention tendencies (M = 4.67, SD = 1.67), and higher personal norm scores (M = 4.00, SD = 0.92). Participants with a lower annual income ( $\leq$  \$49,999) reported the following for our outcome variables: knowledge of e-waste and its negative environmental impact (M = 3.94, SD = 1.78), product retention tendency (M = 4.30, SD = 1.54), and personal norms (M = 3.81, SD = 0.96). A t-test analysis concluded that outcome differences based on income were statistically significant, indicating that participants

with a higher annual income had higher reports of knowledge of e-waste negatively impacting the environment, product retention tendencies, and personal norms. Furthermore, the results concluded that personal norms for pro-environmentalism significantly predicted product retention ( $B = .405$ ,  $p = .000$ ), while knowledge of e-waste impacting the environment did not.

These results indicated that knowledge of e-waste negatively impacting the environment and personal norms for pro-environmentalism does not necessarily lead people to get rid of their e-waste. Contradictory to our hypothesis, the more pro-environmental an individual is the more likely they are to hold onto their items. An important consideration may be that an individual who is pro-environmental may not know how to best recycle their items, which is what leads to their product retention tendencies; future research is necessary to determine if this is the case or not. When decluttering professionals are working with people negatively impacted by their clutter, it is important to consider adding e-waste considerations into their interventions. When approaching interventions including e-waste, decluttering professionals may benefit from attempting to influence the norms of an individual, rather than simply just their knowledge of e-waste impacting the environment.

**“What Were You Thinking (During COVID)?” Decisions to Declutter.** The first study explored a motivational variable that may have affected decluttering projects in the unique context of a pandemic. During the initial COVID-19 outbreaks, many people were sheltered in place and spent more time in their homes than usual. In tandem with other restrictions on daily activities and leisure, researchers hypothesized that many Americans may be experiencing a negative motivational phenomenon called psychological reactance. Psychological reactance research demonstrates that when our autonomy is threatened, we may be motivated to act against the expectation. The study assessed if psychological reactance was related to clutter quality of life. A partial correlation analysis controlling for social desirability assessed the relationship between the four subscales of Psychological Reactance and the four subscales of the Clutter Quality of Life scale. Because the correlations between reactance and the perceived impact of clutter on quality of life were significant, a linear regression analysis tested for a direct relationship between reactance and clutter quality of life.

The hierarchical multiple regression revealed that social desirability contributed significantly to the regression model,  $F(1, 223) = 15.187$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .253$ . Adding reactance to advice scores explained an additional 10.1% of the variance in emotional clutter quality of life scores. Adding resisting influence and emotional response to restricted choice explained an additional 2.5% of the variance. The overall model explained a significant amount of variance in emotional clutter quality of life scores,  $F(1, 223) = 15.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .379$ ; indicating that 37.9% of the variance in respondents' emotional clutter quality of life score is a result of their social desirability, reactance, resisting influence scores, and restricted choice. The

remaining 62.1% of emotional clutter quality of life is undetermined and needs to be further explored by research.

For organizing and productivity professionals, awareness of reactance may provide insight into how individuals will respond to advice and recommendations in decluttering projects. Negative emotional states may hinder decluttering projects and increase the impact of clutter as seen in the regression analyses. Asking individuals how their personal projects have been impacted by advice or behavioral restrictions may inform professionals on the level and type of support that clients may need.

**Adults with Aversive Abundance: Describing Cluttered Home Structures.** The second study examined clutter quality of life differences based on dwelling structure in a sample of adults. Participants provided the square footage of their home, the number of bedrooms and bathrooms, the type of dwelling, and the state in which they reside. The relationship between these variables and the impact of clutter on quality of life was analyzed, and results showed that perceived impact of clutter on quality of life correlated significantly with square footage and the number of bedrooms and bathrooms. Though no previous research has considered the dimensionality of home structures as it relates to clutter, this study confirms a relationship between home size and clutter.

To further analyze data for this project, we created three categories to split up respondents' CQLS scores - high clutter impact, average clutter impact, and low clutter impact. The chi-square tests revealed participants' CQLS category association (e.g., high clutter impact, average clutter impact, and low clutter impact) was not significantly different based on the state participants resided in or the type of dwelling. A MANOVA indicated there was a significant difference for participants' CQLS category association and their number of bedrooms ( $p = .021$ ) and bathrooms ( $p = .000$ ) in their living space,  $F(4,00) = 10.62$ ,  $p = .000$ . A post-hoc test examining the differences between the three CQLS categories found that in terms of number of bedrooms, the only significant group difference was between low impact ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) and high impact clutter ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ),  $p = .017$ . There were no significant differences between low impact and average impact and average impact and high impact for the number of bedrooms.

The present study suggests that the impact of clutter on quality of life may be influenced by the number of bedrooms and bathrooms in one's home. Contradictory to our hypotheses, results show that for those who struggle to manage their personal possessions, unnecessary additional space may further complicate decluttering tasks and even drive overconsumption.

**Student Shelters: Does Where Students Live (Home, Apartment, Dorm) Impact Life with Clutter?** In the final study, researchers explored the quality of life as a result of clutter and feelings of psychological home in a sample of college students. For many university students, student housing (e.g., a dormitory) provides greater autonomy with regards to the use and maintenance of living space as compared to

their previous living situation with parents or guardians. This study found a negative relationship between psychological home and clutter quality of life in a sample of college students, indicating that lower psychological home is related to more negative clutter quality of life. These results suggest that how students feel about their dorm affects their clutter outcomes. Gender differences were also examined and indicated that women experience a greater sense of psychological home compared to men.

Specifically, a bivariate correlation shows that there is a negative, moderately strong relationship between Psychological Home and CQLS ( $r = -.225$ ). Psychological home was correlated significantly to livability of space ( $r = -.241$ ,  $p = .023$ ), social ( $r = -.238$ ,  $p = .025$ ), financial ( $r = -.232$ ,  $p = .029$ ). Psychological home was not significantly correlated with the emotional subscale of clutter quality of life. An independent samples t-test tested for gender differences in psychological home. The analysis revealed there was a significant group difference between males ( $M = 43.42$ ,  $SD = 8.31$ ) and females ( $M = 48.72$ ,  $(SD = 6.78)$ ,  $t(143) = -3.748$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ).

This research offers a first glance at how gender norms and differences in space personalization may impact clutter outcomes. Although there was no interaction between gender and clutter quality of life in this study, considering one's attachment and stake in living spaces may inform intervention plans if clutter becomes problematic.

### **Solutions & Conclusion:**

Taken together, these seven research projects further clutter research by detailing how people may experience clutter differently based on who they are and where they are. More specifically, these studies together ascertain that how we identify with our living spaces appears to impact clutter. From college-age students to older adults, personalization of, attachment to, and the amount of living space seemed to be important when managing clutter. Through our work, we expanded clutter research to include digital and e-waste clutter, finding that they have similar negative effects on well-being as physical clutter. Furthermore, being self-motivated to achieve decluttering tasks may be crucial; advice and recommendations from others hindered personal projects.

We hope that organizing and productivity professionals are able to use these findings to tailor their approach when working with various populations.

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