

New Article by Catherine Roster and Joseph Ferrari Offers Lessons for PO's

Title: *Having Less: A Personal Project Taxonomy of Consumers' Decluttering Orientations, Motives and Emotions*

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Authors: Catherine A. Roster, PhD, The University of New Mexico and Joseph R. Ferrari, PhD, DePaul University

Many average American households have a problem with clutter, or overflowing accumulations of material possessions. Surveys reveal that nearly half of adults in the U.S. feel overwhelmed by mountains of excess stuff piled up in their closets, attics, and garages. Numerous television shows, magazine articles, and books on decluttering and organizing have appeared on the market to help consumers eager to lighten their load and gain control over their use of time and space. For those who are able and willing to pay for organizing expertise, a legion of professional organizers is available to assist clients either in-person or virtually. Retailers like Target, The Container Store, and Bed Bath and Beyond provide an increasing assortment of products and services to help consumers with their decluttering projects.

Research demonstrates that decluttering has beneficial consequences for personal well-being and domestic life. Consumers report feeling happier after decluttering. Tidying, sorting, storing, and organizing one's things restores peoples' sense of control over their environment. Having fewer possessions to manage and take care of also frees up people's time and energy to focus on what really matters in their lives.

Decluttering on a routine basis helps to avoid mess, disorder, and chaos that accompany overconsumption in materialistic societies. Nevertheless, our experiences as academics who have studied clutter, hoarding, and procrastination demonstrate that people's ability and willingness to declutter on a regular basis varies widely. The question we asked in this study was: why is decluttering enjoyable for some and stressful to others?

We surveyed 172 consumers who had recently completed a decluttering project to discover what factors differentiated their level of engagement with this household practice. The survey was distributed to a convenience sample of consumers who were recruited with help from the *Institute for Challenging Disorganization* (ICD).

We considered a wide variety of factors, including:

- how much time they had available for decluttering,
- how much control and responsibility they had over the project
- feelings of self-efficacy toward decluttering
- support from household members, and
- the connection between decluttering and people's personal values and self-image.

We also examined motives and emotions toward decluttering.

Our analysis of the data revealed three distinct orientations toward decluttering that we named “disengaged,” “challenged,” and “enthusiastic.”

The “challenged” and “disengaged” groups

Those in the challenged and disengaged groups reported having less time, control, resources, support, and ability to organize and declutter. These groups experienced more difficulty and stress decluttering, especially the disengaged orientation who felt least able to manage the project.

The “enthusiastic” group enjoyed decluttering and felt they had adequate skills and resources to complete their project.

We also examined motives and emotions before and after decluttering. Those in the “enthusiastic” group were intrinsically motivated to declutter and linked outcomes to their self-identity and personal values.

The “disengaged” and “challenged” groups were more extrinsically motivated, typically by situational needs or demands of others. “Challenged” and “disengaged” participants experienced higher levels of worry, anxiety, and fear prior to decluttering, while those in the “enthusiastic” group felt confident, hopeful, and eager to get started.

All three groups reported higher positive emotions after decluttering than before, especially the enthusiastic orientation who experienced the highest levels of happiness. “Disengaged” and “challenged” participants afterward felt a mixture of relief and happiness alongside some disappointment and guilt, particularly those in the disengaged group who were the least motivated to declutter. Last, the “enthusiastic” orientation rated their projects as more successful than did those in either the disengaged or challenged groups.

Our findings offer practical implications for professional organizers who work with clients in their home to help them declutter. First, findings show that consumers are more engaged with decluttering when they are **intrinsically** as opposed to **extrinsically** motivated to do so.

Intrinsic motivation is enhanced when people value a behavior as meaningful to them and identify with its purpose in their life. **This suggests it may be useful for professional organizers to help clients envision how decluttering will enable them to achieve future goals that are important to them, like creating more time for self or family or being more productive when working from home.**

Our findings also reveal the **motivational power of self-efficacy.**

Decluttering specialists should strive to reinforce feelings of control and self-efficacy throughout the decluttering process, such as:

- helping clients establish realistic interim project goals
- celebrating milestones.

It is also important to manage emotions through the decluttering process. Managing emotions is also an important way to keep clients engaged in decluttering. Professional organizers need to be aware of the level of stress the client is experiencing. Taking frequent breaks or alternating between low stress and high stress tasks are techniques organizers can use to manage their clients’ stress levels during the decluttering project.

Finding ways to make it easier for consumers to maintain orderly, decluttered spaces alleviates problems of overconsumption and encourages consumers to make mindful changes to their consumption habits and routines.

Community recycling and drop-off or take-back programs by retailers can make it more convenient for consumers to donate unused goods and hazardous waste material stored in their home. Other recommendations include offering ways for consumers to rent or share products, especially those that are seldom used, and for repairing and repurposing goods to extend their lifetimes.