

**When Letting Go is Really Hard:
Strategies Professional Organizers Use to Create Safe Passage**

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research has clearly demonstrated the centrality of possessions in consumers' lives (e.g., Belk, 1988). Yet, consumer disposition of possessions remains an understudied area within the domain of consumer behavior. Current disposition models do not reflect emotional or cognitive factors that can accompany disposition tasks, or even, consumers' propensity or ability to undertake the task of sorting through their inventory of possessions. Ultimately, we are what we own. Thus, the process of letting go of objects can be described as that of "dispossession," involving not only disposition activities and choices, but also the negotiation of factors associated with breaking the sometimes complex ties that bind consumers to possessions.

For some consumers, dealing with the process of letting go is so extremely difficult that it requires professional help. The consumers reported on in this study sought professional help with the process of sorting through their personal inventories and making really hard disposition decisions. Several were hoarders experiencing debilitating losses in their quality of life due to their inability to part with objects. Others were simply overwhelmed with the task. Trained professional organizers play a front-line role in assisting consumers who need help navigating the process of making really hard choices regarding their personal inventories.

This study examines factors and strategies used to facilitate the process of letting go when it is extremely difficult. A greater understanding of the process of dispossession under these circumstances reveals more fully the complexity of disposition decisions. Furthermore, by examining the process from these professionals' point of view, researchers can gain insights about how to achieve "Safe Passage" of objects, a key concept that emerged from the findings.

Ninety-four client case descriptions were compiled from professional organizers (POs) across the United States, all of whom were members of the National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization (NSGCD). The data collection method is best described as a narrative case survey. An Internet survey was used to collect detailed case accounts from POs. Respondents were asked to "think about a past or current client who experienced great difficulty parting with their possessions" and to respond to five open-ended questions with this client in mind. Seventy-eight participants also responded to a series of closed-ended questions about the types of clients they routinely deal with and factors that impact their approach. Within and cross-case coding of the over 175 pages of textual data was aided by use of NVivo 7 software. Data analysis of coded themes was guided by analysis techniques described by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Later, member checks were conducted with over one dozen informants to assure the trustworthiness of interpretations.

Findings revealed a paradigm based on context, conditions, strategies, and consequences revolving around a central theme best described as achieving "Safe Passage." Safe Passage appeared to represent a peaceful state of mind consumers realized from successfully navigating the emotional, cognitive, and decision challenges associated with letting go of meaningful goods.

The initial part of the paradigm describes client and PO factors that influence the process. Client factors included: (1) mental or physical conditions, such as compulsive hoarding, compulsive buying, ADHD, physical disabilities, or chronic depression; (2) possession meaning and value; (3) emotions about the process; and (4) situational factors, such as recent life transitions. PO factors included: (1) sensitivity toward the client; (2) problem-solving skills and experience; and (3) expertise and training as a change-agent. The primary antecedent for achieving Safe Passage was establishing a good relationship between the PO and the client based on an awareness of the problem, motivation to change, and trust. Achievement of this critical antecedent was contingent upon factors that each party brought to the relationship.

The middle part of the paradigm describes dispossession coping strategies. Strategies in part reflected coping strategies described by Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub (1989). Emotion-based strategies included tactics like asking clients to sort goods by meaning (e.g., “friends, family, or acquaintances”), transporting meanings through use of iconic transfer (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005) to other vehicles so that they might be more easily accommodated (e.g., taking photos of objects or making curtains out of fabric scraps from mom’s old clothing), and encouraging clients to engage in story-telling. Problem-focused strategies included tactics like establishing rules (e.g., no more than 25 pairs of shoes; when you buy a new pair, one has to go), clarifying goals and priorities (e.g., wouldn’t you like to have a home that is safe for your grandchildren to visit again and can be a place to entertain guests?); and putting into place support mechanisms to help clients maintain their goals. Safe Passage dispossession strategies included fostering meaning-matched disposition decisions (e.g., my tent collection should go to the Girl Scouts; I can get more from this on eBay), maintaining respect for objects, regardless of their demise (e.g., fold clothes to be donated neatly), and engaging in “good-bye” rituals, including funerals for objects complete with eulogies.

The final part of the paradigm describes Safe Passage outcomes. Safe Passage emerged as a consequence that arose when possessors successfully navigated challenges associated with the dispossession of meaningful goods. Safe Passage consequences included peace of mind and quality of life improvements that were beneficial to a person’s economical, emotional, social, physical and spiritual well-being.

Possessions play a vital role in developing, defining, communicating, and maintaining our sense of self-identity. Therefore, it is no wonder that letting go of possessions can be an emotionally painful and difficult process. The consumers described in this study found the process so difficult that they enlisted the help of professional organizers. Nevertheless, the implications of these findings are applicable to consumers in general who face difficult dispossession processes and the family members and friends they enlist for support.