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TITLE: Clutter the persistent curse of the acquiring class

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Is there a room in your home that you don't like visitors to see? Do you fight with your loved ones about all the clutter in the spare room or the garage? You're not alone. Four in 10 Australians admit to feeling anxious, depressed or guilty about the amount of clutter in their homes. Some people have reached a point where all that extraneous stuff has taken over their homes, and their lives.

A study by the Australia Institute, *Stuff Happens*, found that women in particular find clutter distressing. They don't necessarily have more clutter than men (the typical suburban garage would dispel that notion) but they tend to notice it more. Women are also more embarrassed by their clutter than men.

Clutter - defined as "too many items that are rarely or never used" to distinguish it from things that do get used but look messy - is so commonplace in Australian homes that it seems to be the norm. Almost nine in 10 people have at least one cluttered room in their home, and the average home has three or more cluttered rooms.

Naturally enough, clutter tends to accumulate over a lifetime, with older people having more clutter than younger people. However, younger people are more worried about their clutter and more anxious to do something about it. Older people, by contrast, seem to have accepted or resigned themselves to their clutter.

The items that constitute clutter are extremely varied and depend on the circumstances and personalities in each household. And there are several different categories of clutter, depending on the nature of a person's "attachment" to things, our research showed.

Emotional clutter has sentimental meaning but little financial value. It could include children's toys or drawings, unused or unwanted gifts, school or university notes, or the personal possessions of absent loved ones.

Just-in-case clutter has little or no sentimental value but since it "might come in handy one day" it is kept for some time. Examples include old bills or bank statements, tools or stationery.

Bargain clutter is free or very cheap items acquired at sales, from friends or family or "by the side of the road". Certain personality types tend to be especially attracted to bargain clutter.

Bought clutter consists of impulse purchases that never end up being used. It commonly includes clothes, fashion accessories and electronic items and is strongly linked to wasteful consumption.

Cluttered homes can perhaps be seen as an analogue of the obesity epidemic. Most of us don't want to buy things we won't end up using, just like most of us would like to be slimmer and fitter than we actually are. Yet the results of our research suggest Australian homes are often cluttered with things that are rarely or never used. We may not want to live in "fat houses" but we do.

When talking about people with obsessive-compulsive disorder (including compulsive shoppers and compulsive hoarders), psychologists use the concept of self-ambivalence: the presence of mutually incompatible beliefs about oneself.

Self-ambivalence is not poor self-esteem; rather, it is uncertainty about one's own self-worth. This notion rings true in an age of almost limitless choice about what we can do with our lives.

Of course, it's only a small proportion of people who have such severe problems with clutter. Yet many of us would be familiar with the urge to buy something we don't really need or want, simply for the thrill of the purchase or to impress others. There is even a term for this: "retail therapy". We live in an era where meaning and fulfilment is sometimes easier to find in "lifestyle" than in life.

The alternative to cluttering up our homes is simply to avoid acquiring unwanted or useless items in the first place. Among other things, this requires a more conscious approach to shopping: buying what we really need and will use.

It also requires a healthy scepticism towards commercial messages trying to convince us to buy things that we don't really want. If we follow these principles, perhaps we can reclaim our homes.