Everyone knows that adults have too many possessions. The evidence for this is apparent from our personal environs—homes, outbuildings, workplaces, the trunk of the car. Stories about material overload in the households of relatives and friends come easily to mind. There is an entire clutter-control industry populated by home organizers and spilling out from self-help manuals, websites, and television shows (Cwerner & Metcalfe, 2003).

Despite a strong popular belief in the problem of possessions, survey evidence is hard to come by. Research on possessions is almost wholly qualitative. As informative as such studies are, we nevertheless lack population-based estimates about the bother of belongings. How indeed do people appraise the volume and potential burden of their things?

The 2010 administration of the ongoing Health and Retirement Study (HRS) provided an opportunity to ask just such questions of a national sample of middle-aged and older adults. The HRS is a representative panel survey of Americans aged 50 and older that collects economic, health, and psychosocial information. Panel members have been resurveyed biennially since 1992 with new birth cohorts added over time (details at http://hrsonline.isr.umich.edu).

At each survey wave, the HRS includes experimental question modules that are randomly assigned to a 10% sample of the approximately 17,000 respondents. These modules are limited to a few minutes in length. The experimental questions about possessions addressed the totality of belongings in three respects: the appraisal of volume, active management of possessions, and whether belongings would pose an obstacle to any residential move.

HRS data are released in stages and the final data will not be available until later in 2012. The early-release files are not complete for people in their 50s, but are reasonably
complete for respondents aged 60 and older and living in the community (N = 1,089). This is a fitting age range for starting an examination of the survey responses because this is the stage of life during which the material convoy is likely to have crested in size, having accumulated to furnish daily life as well as the ongoing project of the self (Smith & Ekerdt, 2011).

More or less than you need

One of the key questions was this: “Thinking of the belongings that you own or are keeping at your home, do you feel that you have more things than you need, fewer things than you need, or just the right amount?” Before reading on, it’s worthwhile to pause to guess just what the distribution of responses might be. In originating this question, my research group literally did not know what answer we were going to get.

Based on the early-release data for persons aged 60+, 5% of respondents said they had fewer things than they need, 35% said just the right amount, and 60% agreed that they had more things than they need. Before narrowing the focus to that last percentage, it is worth noting the 5% who feel under-provisioned, a group that will eventually merit following up in order to understand this response. But, on to the 60% who feel that they have more things than they need. By recent count of the U.S. Census there are 57 million Americans aged 60 and older; 60% of this total extrapolates to nearly 35 million people admitting to an excess of belongings. That is a very large potential market for advice and services related to housing, lifestyles, and stuff.

What are the correlates of feeling over-provisioned? Not gender—men and women answer this almost identically. Not personality to any significant extent (e.g., neuroticism, conscientiousness, openness to experience). It stands to reason that the bigger the household, the more the press of possessions, and that is borne out. Married people, with two occupants of the household and someone else to blame, are more likely to say that they have more than they need. So are homeowners (vs. renters) and people in dwellings with more rooms. By asset quintiles, wealthier people are more likely to admit to too many things—75% saying so among the top quintile. The response about excess possessions, however, is sharply lower among persons who have moved in the last two years, probably because these relocations entailed the downsizing that is typical of moves in later life.

The HRS questions also probed whether family members or friends, within the last year, had told the respondent that “you should downsize your belongings.” Twenty-eight percent acknowledged having been told this and, of these, half reported that the family members or friends offered to help. Altogether, then, one out of seven people over the age of 60 has others concerned about the fullness of their home.

Routine possession divestment

The stock and store of possessions might appear more modest if people routinely thinned and culled their things. Notwithstanding the pep talks of clutter-control advisers (just sort it all into three piles), studies of routine possession management reveal that divestment is laborious (Gregson, 2007; Hetherington, 2004). The HRS
respondents were asked: “In the last year, how often have you gone through your home or other storage areas to clean out or reduce the number of things that you have?” Altogether, 13% had done this “many times,” 61% “a few times,” and 26% “not at all.” People who admitted to having too many things were only marginally more active in cleaning out. Consistent with the gendered nature of household labor, women were more likely than men to reduce belongings.

As to disposition methods, only 3% said that they had sold “many things” in the past year (80% sold nothing), 14% had given many things away to family or friends (34% gave nothing), and 23% had donated many things to a charity, church, or community group (27% gave nothing). This hierarchy of strategies is not surprising. Selling things takes skills and know-how. Gifts to family and friends seem to require an occasion, premise, transition, or acknowledged turning point in the elder’s life (Ekerdt, Addington, & Hayter, 2011). Both selling and giving are social transactions that risk disappointment with the outcome. But donating to charities and agencies is easier because these recipients have regular hours and they generally take it all.

An obstacle to relocation

I am part of a research team that is interviewing elders about their experience with downsizing—how they accomplish it and how they feel about it (Ekerdt, Luborsky, & Lysack, in press; Luborsky, Lysack, & van Nuil, 2011). We have visited over 100 households in the areas around the University of Kansas and Wayne State University in Detroit. We contend that if older adults cannot downsize and divest, it may be an obstacle to their living in more appropriate housing where they can live independently and better manage their own well-being.

Given this interest, the HRS question set also asked: “Think about the effort that it would take to move your belongings to another home. How reluctant to move does that make you feel?” In reply, 23% felt “not reluctant at all,” but double that share, 48%, felt “very reluctance” to move. And, as above, this sentiment about reluctance to move was also stronger the more commodious, peopled, affluent, and long-established the household, and if the respondent admits to having too many things.

This is what comes of life-course consumption and keeping: a predicament of possessions. Barring the complete HRS data, it is too soon to draw further conclusions about the press of possessions in middle-age and later life. For example, with additional cases of persons aged 50-59, the reputed materialism of the Baby Boom can be compared to older cohorts. In pursuing further analysis, we hope to raise the profile of this topic. With advancing age, the manageability and future disposition of the material convoy comes into question, especially as time horizons shrink and the risk of vulnerability rises. Though it will be an occasion for yet more consumption, one has to appreciate a great potential market for interventions, techniques, and practices to help older adults optimize their home environments and thus reduce care and worry.

References


