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IT TURNS OUT THE ARMOIRE IS YOUR MOTHER:

Narratives of Addiction in Two Cable Television Organization Programs

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ABSTRACT

An ideological analysis was conducted of two cable television programs which offer strategies on how to organize the “stuff” accumulated by individuals: *Clean Sweep*, which airs on the TLC cable channel, and *Clean House*, which airs on the Style cable channel. Both programs send in energetic team of experts to help couples identify and dispose of items that they believe (and the couples agree) are negatively impacting their lives. The assumption emerging from these programs is that the unbridled passion of the guests for accumulation – of collectibles, and of just plain “stuff” – has begun to damage their lives. Rather than simply help these individuals get rid of what they no longer need, these programs sustain an ideology that suggests that the individuals who appear on these programs are addicts, desperately in need of a nationally televised intervention.
INTRODUCTION

In previous papers, I have explored dimensions of collecting that have played out in the mass media: the meaning for collectors of a daylong visit to the popular PBS program, the *Antiques Roadshow*; dominant narratives that emerge from news media coverage of collecting, and, most recently, the fluidity of the museum concept as seen in episodes of the PBS television program *Find!* and *Collector Inspector*, which airs on the cable channel HGTV.

Here, I take a slightly new path, and turn my attention to two new television programs which offer strategies on how to organize the “stuff” accumulated by families: *Clean Sweep*, which airs on the TLC cable channel, and *Clean House*, which airs on the Style cable channel. Both programs send in energetic team of experts to help couples identify and dispose of items that they believe (and the couples agree) are negatively impacting their lives. And apparently many of us need their brand of help: we spent more than $5 billion in 2002 on tools for organization (Koncius, 2004, p. H1). These shows, claim journalists, are an “outgrowth of the organization industry that has emerged in recent years to defeat the clutter engulfing us” (“The Urge to Purge,” 2004, p. 106).

But beneath this obvious theme lies the focus of my research: the assumption emerging from these programs that these are collectors whose unbridled passion for accumulation – of collectibles, and of just plain “stuff” – has begun to damage their lives. Rather than simply help these individuals get rid of what they no longer need (a trip to Goodwill would not make for riveting television), these programs create an ideology that suggests that the individuals who appear on these programs are addicts, desperately in need of a nationally televised intervention.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS

*Clean Sweep*, a weekly program, recently completed its second season on the TLC cable channel. Media giants Liberty Media, Cox Communications, and Advance Publications/Newhouse own shares of TLC’s parent company, Discovery Communications, Inc.
A visit to the show’s discussion board in March 2005 (www.tlc.discovery.com) revealed that the network has no plans to produce new episodes of the show; the last original episode will air in October 2005. Hosting the program is Tava Smiley, who also is in the cast of the ABC soap General Hospital. Smiley replaced Stacey Dutton, who hosted the show during its first season.

Couples contact the shows in the hopes that the producers will choose to shoot an episode at their homes. The “Clean Sweep team,” made up of a professional organizer – either Peter Walsh (billed on the show’s website as “part-contractor, part-therapist”) or Sherrie Alexander – one of four rotating designers, carpenter Eric Stromer, and about a dozen able assistants, descend on the home of a couple who has amassed a disturbingly large amount of things. The “team” selects two particularly cluttered rooms to purge and redesign. We meet the couple, who then describe for Smiley how their house became so disorganized and how this disorganization now makes them feel. “Disoriented,” said one Clean Sweep guest.

In both shows, couples are asked to assign blame for the mess. Often, one person will quickly blame the other. Some couples share the blame. “It’s an even split of whose junk is where,” said one woman during a Clean Sweep episode. “Maybe it’s more his – I think it’s more his.” Her husband, however, was certain that the mess in the office was her fault. “Her zone is so messy – I have no place to put my stuff.” These descriptions are usually accompanied by quick pans or handheld camera shots (often at a low angle) of their belongings.

Once the clutter is removed (the process is sped up for viewers, thanks to a fast-motion video effect), the designer and carpenter talk about the redesign, usually beginning their dialogue by commenting about how spacious the rooms are without all of the items accumulated by the couple. Paint colors are revealed, design strategies are outlined; viewers see periodic updates of the redesign’s progress.

Meanwhile, Smiley takes the couple through a quick (30-minute) first sort of their items. She instructs the couple to decide whether they will “keep,” “sell,” or “toss” each item, and then move the item to a section of their yard identified by a corresponding brightly colored flag.
Walsh, who also contributes to the design and renovation, then begins a more thorough purge. Couples move items to a newly designated “keep” pile – “new sacred ground” as White called it in one episode. Items placed here are the only ones allowed back in the house.

When one of the homeowners expresses reluctance to sell or dispose of an item, Walsh, armed with a master’s degree in educational psychology, or Alexander, confronts them. The organizer asks the couple to consider how the item is making it impossible to live happily in their home. If the couple tells a particularly personal story about how an item was obtained (for example, a shirt once worn by a woman’s deceased father), the organizer will remind them that the memories of the person, or, the promise of the future unencumbered by certain memories, are more significant, more powerful, than the item itself. This segment of the show is the source for the title of this paper; in one episode, Walsh firmly told a woman that an item “was not your mother.”

Meanwhile, the Clean Sweep designer and carpenter renovate the rooms, their progress hidden from the homeowners. Once the second round of purging is complete, the couple holds a yard sale, managed by Smiley, for the items they have placed, often with great angst, in the “sell” pile. Each person tries to sell as many items as they can. The person who makes the most money during the sale gets to keep a preselected item disliked by their significant other. The losing person’s item, along with what is not sold, is “swept off to charity.”

The show concludes with a “reveal” of the two rooms (now stylish and uncluttered), but not before viewers see a flashback to the pre-purge clutter. Unlike the TLC show Trading Spaces, where homeowners are often disappointed with their home’s televised makeover – and quite willing to share their disappointment – homeowners on Clean Sweep are rarely displeased with the efforts of the design team. They are typically jubilant that their once cluttered lives are now back on track; that their addiction to accumulation has, for the moment anyway, been calmed.

Clean House airs weekly on the Style Channel, which is part of E! Entertainment Television. The Walt Disney Corporation, cable giant Comcast, and Liberty Media own parts of
E! Comedian Niecy Nash, who appeared on the Comedy Central program *Reno 911*, hosts the show. Nash oversees the work of a designer (Mark Burnetz), a professional organizer (Tanya Whitford or Linda Koopersmith) and Allen Lee Haff, an expert in hosting garage sales.

Like *Clean Sweep*, the *Clean House* design team selects two rooms in a home to renovate. Items from the rooms are removed and put up for sale. Unlike Peter Walsh, who psychoanalyzes and counsels guests as they decide to get rid of items, the *Clean Sweep* team’s comments focus mainly on the visible impact of the items on their guests’ lives. They are often shown expressing shock at a family’s clutter, but make only cursory attempts to find out how the clutter accumulated.

After the yard sale (described by one journalist as the “cathartic centerpiece around which the show pivots” (“The Urge to Purge,” 2004, p. 106) and while the renovation is completed, the guests are treated to a stay at a posh hotel or tickets to a local attraction. The show lacks the “keep/sell/toss” segment featured on *Clean Sweep*. The money earned by the homeowner during the garage sale is used to pay for the renovation of their rooms – after the *Clean House* team matches the amount they raised, up to $1,000.

As in *Clean Sweep*, viewers see the stages of the renovation, a reminder of the past clutter, and the “reveal.” Where *Clean Sweep* purports to bring couples closer together, *Clean House* promotes the fact that it highlights “feuding families.” Nash concludes each episode with a reminder to viewers that her work is not done; that there are more houses to reorganize. She and her colleagues are out to reform America’s clutter addicts “one house at a time.”

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

A sophisticated description of the literature on addiction is beyond the author’s expertise. For the purposes of this paper, however, I can offer a brief exploration of the culturally “authorized” story of addiction, as David Morris (1998, p. 34) might call it. Much of the medical community treats addiction as a disease. Adherents of the disease model view the addict as being
in the “grip” of a substance or activity. The addict has lost control of his or her life, and is powerless to make meaningful progress until treatment is sought. The addiction, which medical professionals often treat as if it has arisen without any connection to childhood or to environment, is permanent. It can be treated successfully, but never eradicated.

Moreover, an addict must seek treatment, usually in a 12-step program. The medical community rejects self-remission or “natural recovery” – the idea that addicts can defeat their addiction on their own, without treatment. “Addiction is not self-curing,” suggests Robert Dupont, former director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). “Left alone, addiction only gets worse, leading to total degradation, to prison, and ultimately, to death” (quoted in Granfield & Cloud, 1999, p. x). Thus, a regimen of treatment must also become “a permanent feature” in the lives of an addict (Peele, 1975, p. 4).

NIDA Director Alan Leshner wrote more recently that the emergence of an addiction “occurs through a combination of processes, including a series of brain changes or neuroadaptations that result from repeated drug exposure” (2001). For an addiction to develop, the brain’s structure must change, he argues; thus, addiction “qualifies as a brain disease--a brain disease expressed as compulsive behavior. It's the quintessential biobehavioral disorder.”

Such a view is echoed in Jean Baudrillard’s (1996) exploration of why we collect particular items. An object becomes “charged” when we invest our psychic energy in it. But this investment is costly; we lose part of our ability “to experience the world, to process information, to pursue goals” (p. 8) by investing energy in an object “to the exclusion of other possibilities.” This investment consumes us, much as an addiction does.

On the other side of this debate are psychologists and psychiatrists who argue that an addiction is rooted in a person’s experience. What we become addicted to “takes on meaning and power in the light of a person’s needs, desires, beliefs, expectations, and fears” (Peele, 1975, p. 5). To truly understand an addiction, one must recognize “the function the addiction serves in an individual’s life” (p. 5).
Psychologist Stanton Peele contends that treatment models offered by groups like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) have shaped our perceptions of addiction. Many of us are quite familiar with the introduction an alcoholic gives during an AA meeting, and, thanks to many portrayals in television and movies, we have seen more than one “intervention.” What we do not see, Peele claims, is the ongoing effort of AA and related organizations to shape our perceptions of addiction.

We know the rhetoric: addicts must admit their powerlessness in the face of their addiction; they must acknowledge their lack of control. But the reality is often quite different; individuals who seek out AA have just as good a chance of beating their addiction by changing their behavior on their own. “People respond best to treatment that builds on their existing perceptions and experiences,” Peele argues (1995, p. 80).

Addicts are also forced to recognize that their addiction will never end – “you must accept it as a badge of identity,” Peele argues (1975, p. 4). A postmodernist might view the addict’s experience as just one more “overt, public, cultural discourse” (Morris, p. 34) that only further clutters our image-saturated culture. “The power to make us sick or well,” Morris explains, “inheres not only in microbes and medications, but in images and stories” (p. 36).

Since society has embraced the medical model of addiction, it is not surprising, Peele notes, that medical professionals believe it is possible to become addicted to anything, and that many of us are most likely are addicted to something. “More and more addictions are being discovered, and new addicts are being identified,” Peele writes (1995, p. 4), “until all of us will be locked into our own little addictive worlds with other addicts like ourselves, defined by the special interests of our neuroses.” Melissa Friedling (1996) argues that addiction “no longer refers merely to the dependency on ‘foreign substances,’ but has come to describe an ‘epidemic’ that extends its significance by pathologizing all consumer behavior” (p. 116).

Such a development would not surprise the postmodernist, who believes that there is, to quote Morris (1998), “nothing outside the image” (p. 25). Sarup (1993) contends that
postmodernism revolves around “the deletion of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between elite and popular culture; a stylistic eclecticism and the mixing of codes” (p. 122). In short, Morris claims, reality does not exist “unless we view it on the screen” (p. 32). The distinction between real and the copy has disappeared, as Jean Baudrillard might argue.

If the postmodern view is even partially valid, “we can no longer maintain such a binary distinction between the authentic and the marketed,” as Gunn and Brummett (2004) argue. While the disease model of addiction (with its reliance on professional treatment) is clearly a modernist concept, the ideology that emerges from Clean Sweep and Clean House suggests a postmodern view of addiction. What we see is a now popular copy of the addiction experience, one that carries a growing amount of cultural authority, since we seem to have embraced addiction as a way to describe nearly any activity in which we engage with a great deal of passion or which consumes a lot of our time. This corps of experts, who exhibit a degree of zeal for organization that suggests they themselves might be addicts, are determined to successfully address “the psychosis of clutter,” as Tava Smiley told a Seattle Post-Intelligencer reporter (Patrick, 2004, p. C1).

METHOD

I performed an ideological analysis on three episodes of Clean Sweep and three episodes of Clean House taped during the winter of 2004. I viewed each episode, reviewing key segments several times, analyzed the websites for both programs, “lurked” in the Clean Sweep discussion board on several occasions (Clean House does not have a discussion board on its website), and compiled and analyzed (via a Lexis-Nexis search conducted in February 2005) articles about Clean Sweep and Clean House that have run in major newspapers since the shows went on the air.
Stuart Hall (1986, p. 15) defines ideology as “the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out, and render intelligible the way society works.”

Certain ideologies become dominant, to the exclusion of ideologies that present alternative perspectives; these are marginalized or suppressed. One way of “seeing the world” holds sway – it achieves hegemony, as Antonio Gramsci would argue. Hegemony is a “condition in process” that enables dominant institutions to exercise “moral and intellectual leadership” (Storey, 1998, p. 124). Through ideology, powerful groups can exercise control over individuals through what Foss refers to as “symbolic coercion” (p. 294). “A dominant ideology controls what participants see as natural or obvious by establishing the norm,” she argues (p. 295).

Those subordinate to the dominant institutions “appear to support and subscribe to values, ideals, objectives, cultural and political meanings which bind them to, and `incorporate’ them into, the prevailing structures of power” (p. 124). What we see as “normal discourse,” then, sustains the ideology. Grossberg (1991) notes that ideology “works as a practice, not merely by producing a system of meanings which purport to represent the world but rather, by producing its own system of meanings as the real, natural (i.e. experienced) one” (p. 145). Challenges to the dominant ideology seem abnormal, as Foss contends.

This research is also informed by the notion that texts invite preferred readings that encourage the formation of subject positions – the manner in which members of the audience are positioned to receive and interpret a text. The ideological nature of the texts explored here moves viewers toward interpretations of the guests’ experiences desired by the program’s producers.

DISCUSSION

My analysis borrows its structure from the flaws in the disease model of addiction identified by Peele (1995): inordinate focus on the addict’s loss of control, the addict’s inability to
recognize a problem without the help of experts, failure of the disease model to link addiction to
environment, the inevitability of treatment, permanence of the addiction, the tendency to hold
addicts to higher moral standards (p. 20), and the suggestion that there are many more addicts out
there, waiting to be found and helped. I will address these themes in the next sections of the
paper.

Loss of control

The introductory segment of both programs suggests that guests turn to the shows
because they can no longer control the clutter – or, more specifically, the impact the clutter is
having on their lives. Underscoring this theme are shots of the clutter, taken at a low angle with a
handheld video camera. Junk teems from overstuffed shelves; items of clothing practically fall
out of closets. One couple keeps an extensive collection of newspapers in their bedroom; another
has to sleep on couches in their family room because their children – and their stuff – have taken
over their bedroom.

News coverage of our inability to shed clutter suggests that it is an epidemic. Carol Allen
told the Washington Post about her “problem with Baltimore Orioles memorabilia;” she found
reassurance in the fact “that there are more people out there like me” (Koncius, 2004, p. H1).
Perhaps, wrote the Post reporter, “misery loves company, because reality-TV fans in vast
numbers also tune unto watch other people being publicly humiliated by their disorder.” The
Village Voice noted that people are more willing than ever “to spread their worldly goods on their
front lawns” in order to get their lives and their psyches back in order. “Removed from the
home’s womb-like enclosure,” our clutter doesn’t seem so “special or intimate anymore” (“The

Memento_maven, a regular poster to the Clean Sweep bulletin boards defends the
participants. “It is not about lazy people getting a free ride, it is about people needing
GUIDANCE and getting it. They do most of the lifting and toting, and they wrestle with the
emotional baggage, too.” Responding to a poster who criticized participants for not being able to clean up their homes without help, memento_maven noted, “I don't think it is sad. I don't think it's sad when an alcoholic or compulsive shopper or ineffective parent seeks help, either. There is nothing shameful about admitting you need help or allowing others to share in your growth experience. I think it's sad if someone prefers to judge people rather than empathize with them.”

But subtle criticism of messy individuals is a key theme, both in the programs and in news coverage of their popularity. “If you’re one of those people spending too much time reading murder mysteries and letting the clutter pile up at home, listen,” intoned National Public Radio’s Alex Chadwick (2003) in a story about organization shows. “Are you drowning in disarray?” ask the creators of the Clean House website. The Clean Sweep site is just as direct: “Is your house cluttered from floor to ceiling with more disorder than anyone can handle?” Host Tava Smiley tells viewers that another couple’s home is “a den of disorganization.” Clean Sweep organizer Peter White rams home this point by climbing on, over, or out from, the clutter when he is first introduced.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) might argue that no longer are these individuals purposively attending to items, as most collectors do. “When attending to something, we do so in order to in order to realize some intention,” they note (p. 5). These programs do more than question a collector’s intent. Individuals who appear on these shows are portrayed as hopeless, indiscriminate packrats, unable to find adequate use for, and unable to remember the emotional connections to, their items.

The programs also suggest that the shows’ guests have withdrawn from society; they are no longer able to express, through their items, the “dynamic processes within people, among people, and between people and the total environment” evident in the behavior of collectors (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. 43). In one episode of Clean House, the dialogue suggests that this disconnect has caused the couple to become whiney and abrasive toward each other. Guests refuse to acknowledge that they have a problem, even if that problem is
largely manufactured by the producers of these shows. They look for any opening that will allow
them to keep a treasured item. “You’re on my side, right?” a woman asked Niecy Nash.

Meanwhile, her husband was busy frustrating the show’s yard sale organizer with his
reluctance to part with his Sony PlayStation, his big-screen television, and his collection of four
South Park dolls (one for each of the show’s main characters). “You gotta work with me Cary,”
said the Clean House team member. “I’m working with you, but certain items – you know…it’s
hard to part with them. It’s a stress release for me,” was Cary’s reply.

The yard sale organizer eventually found himself on his knees, trying desperately to
persuade Cary to part with the television. “If you take away my big-screen, I’ll never get another
one in the bedroom,” Cary pleaded. Soon, however, Cary relents and agrees to sell the television,
but only after one last plea: “Can you do this for me? Can you meet me halfway?”

In one episode of Clean Sweep, this means that a couple has become a repository for
things unwanted by others. “We have an abundance problem,” Kate tells Tava Smiley. Later,
Smiley would comment that Kate and Dudley’s living room “looks like a furniture warehouse,”
as it houses two sets of items from their blended family. “So you’d like to blame your families for
the wasteland of furniture,” Smiley asks accusingly.

A couple in a second episode of Clean Sweep has seen their lives altered by their
possessions. “The chaos in the family room is tearing them apart,” Smiley announces in the
episode’s introduction. There is nowhere to sit in the couple’s family room, and their office “is a
disaster.” The room, says Leah, “is frustrating – and stressful, and it needs a lot of help.”

The clutter has also clouded the sense of self previously realized through the things they
own and with which they have interacted. Things “embody goals, make skills manifest, and shape
the identities of their users” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. 2). When a
collection is successfully managed, we are able to make sense of “all the feelings, memories, and
thoughts that constitute what one is.” The owners’ inability to control their acquisitive tendencies
now prevents them from sorting out the emotions connected to each item, a process the organizers
try to restimulate. “Sometimes people call a collection just that they have 40 rabbits,” organizer Shelley Alexander told a *Clean Sweep* guest. When one chooses “items that really mean something to them – that’s the beginning of a real collection,” she said. “If you’re serious about a collection, that’s totally cool,” Walsh tells Al, whose collection of movie action figures has been lost in a cluttered office. “But I find it hard to believe you’re that serious when it’s covered in so much dust [that] it’s terrifying.”

A Seattle journalist quoted *Clean Sweep* host Tava Smiley as saying that the show “has gone from just an organizational show to one about the psychosis of clutter” (Patrick, 2004, C-1). Slate television critic Dennis Cass, reporting for National Public Radio, contended that the show “speaks to our inner slob” (Chadwick, 2003). The show is designed for “people who have lost entire rooms to vast accumulations of junk.”

In the *Clean Sweep* episode guide, we are introduced to these couples – the title to one episode refers to one couple as “Lord and Lady Mess-A-Lot.” Another couple “is being overtaken by the mounds of clothes and papers in their bedrooms.” The den in another couple’s home “has become a dumping ground for family junk.” At times, guests are unaware how the problem became so severe: No seems to know how Stephanye’s sewing room got to be such a mess,” note the episode guide’s writers.

Reliance on experts

Guests contact these programs because they feel their clutter has gotten the best of them. By accumulating and categorizing so many items, they have lost the ability to “establish domination over time,” as Baudrillard (1994, p. 13) notes. Lost in the clutter is the “fixed repertory of temporal references that can be replayed at will” (p. 16) by an individual who better manages his or her items. Gone is the ability to meaningfully reconstitute or rediscover “the old world” that drives so many collectors.
The experts – young, hip would-be addiction counselors – help their guests reclaim these abilities – and reclaim their space, as one designer put it – but only after designating them as addicts. They act as if they are leading these couples on corporate retreats. They use a combination of tough love and affirmation to get the results they seek. Avid viewers of Clean Sweep rise to the show’s defense when the credibility of the show’s experts is challenged. In response to an individual who posted a note on the show’s bulletin board criticizing Clean Sweep for goading participants into conflict, clamdigger reminded those reading that the wife in that episode acknowledged her “retail therapy” problem, that the home in question was unsanitary, and that Peter Walsh, with his master’s degree, “knows how to get to the root of the problem and how to deal with people.” The Washington Post described a 2004 talk given by Walsh at a home show in which he encouraged those in attendance “to be a sort of Clutterers Anonymous group” (Koncius, 2004, p. H1).

*Clean Sweep*’s Sherri Alexander convinces Alex to get rid of a rack of clothes by congratulating him on his recent weight loss. “Are you ever going back there?” Alexander asks excitedly. Alex answers with an emphatic, self-confidence-charged no. “Today’s the day we’re saying ‘no more’ – we’re not going back. It’s a fresh new start,” Alexander says. As Peele points out, one of the first steps for participants in a program like AA is to learn the symptoms of the disease that the program will convince them that they have. “The treatment is (author’s emphasis) learning the disease viewpoint, combined with group sessions in which people describe their problems and are applauded when they admit these are signs of the disease,” Peele argues (p. 91).

The success of these shows depends on convincing individuals to believe “things about themselves” they did not believe “until they came to treatment” (p. 89). In one segment of Clean House, the designer urges a woman to get rid of most of the dozen chairs she has collected. After withstanding his nudging for a few moments, she finally says, “I have a chair fetish.” Thus, she has come to believe something about herself that didn’t exist until her television “treatment.” Along the way, compliments to the hosts and organizers begin to flow. After congratulating Alex
for getting rid of most of a large t-shirt collection, Sherri Alexander asks, “What’s making you able to get rid of these – what’s changed?” Alex dutifully, but enthusiastically answers, “Clean Sweep is here – helping me get organized in my life.” During the garage sale held later, Alex’s wife, Susan speaks as if she has joined a cult. When a woman asks why she’s giving up a particular item, Susan replies, “we’re cleaning out the clutter in our lives.” She adds, “so try not to talk me out of it, or Stacey (the host) will get mad at me.”

Classification of the show’s guests as addicts begins subtly on the show’s website; the mission of the Clean House cast and crew, according to the show’s website, is “exorcising homes of their sinful mess, one cluttered room at a time”). The Clean House website reassures us that “has seen it all: the clutter, the junk, and the – ugh – open cans of cat food.” Take heart, those fighting the battle of too much stuff; Nash is “excited to help rehab America’s cluttered homes.” Episodes of Clean House also include tips from these experts on how to control our acquisitive tendencies. Asked how to convince children to part with underused toys, a Clean House organizer tells Nash: “[I] make them swear that they love it – that they must have it.” Then, the expert makes sure the child truly loves the item. “I like to play around with them a little bit,” she says dismissively.

At times the classification is more direct, and involves likening the accumulation of items to a more well-known addiction. Peter White handed Kate a large stuffed bear, which represents “a gambling problem I have,” she claimed. Kate then described (and laughed self-deprecatingly) how she spent $500 on the boardwalk trying to win the bear. Later, White asks Kate if she wants the bear to “cost her money and space?” Kate agrees to sell the bear; she holds it up and cheers.

A similar experience confronted Al and Leah. The shell of an old radio had been in their home for some time. Al was convinced that it was valuable. “Tell me about this,” Walsh began. “I love this,” Al said. Walsh cut him off. “No – tell me about it, not ‘I’m in love with this.’” Walsh hugged the radio. After learning that the radio was not, as he had believed, treated with gold leaf, and after Leah stressed that there was no place in the house for it, Al relented. “OK, OK, OK,” he
said. “Let’s put in the sell pile.” As Al walks away with the radio, Leah is jubilant. “Kiss it
goodbye,” she says. “This is just wrong,” is Al’s response. “I’m a team player.”

Al gets a measure of revenge when Walsh persuades Leah to get rid of four of the shelves
that she had been planning to hang “someday,” a word to which Walsh took issue. “Do not use
the ‘s’ word with me,” he said, pointing at Leah. Walsh counts seven shelves, with another one in
the garage. “Thank you,” Al says proudly. “[It’s] Shelves R Us.” Later, Walsh will play “Rock
Paper Scissors” with Leah for a mirror she received as a Christmas present.

Out of whole cloth

Rarely do the programs’ hosts explore in any depth why the guests accumulated so many
items. Peele (1995, p. 146) notes that “all addictions accomplish something for the addict [Peele’s
emphasis].” Instead of exploring why we become addicted, treatment professionals simply label
an activity an addiction. In these programs, it is assumed that the couples are addicted to
accumulation. A key early segment of both shows revolves around assigning blame for the
clutter. On Clean Sweep, Walsh and Smiley often ask couples to use percentages. Such an
approach bypasses deeper reasons for the clutter, and may actually speed the medicalization of
what amounts to not being able to keep a clean house. Leah is frustrated with Al’s collectibles
cluttering up their family room: “There are too many collectibles; it’s too disorganized, not
functional in any way.” Al suggests a solution: “as long as Leah and I have our own spaces and
we can be responsible for our own spaces, and hopefully she’ll get off my back about my
collectibles – I will step up to the place and say ‘yes, I take responsibility for this room. Later,
Leah took “10 percent responsibility” for an office filled with her scrap booking materials.

In one episode of Clean Sweep, it was suggested that the family’s clutter materialized
“with the help of their two boys.” A woman tells Clean House host Niecy Nash that “getting him
[her husband, Cary] to let go of anything is like pulling teeth without Novocain.” She spends her
time running the family business and trying to “run Cary’s junk out of the house.”
Nor do the hosts discuss in any detail the happy, productive parts of their guests’ lives. Children are little more than contributors to the problem. “The boys have brought much happiness into their lives,” Clean Sweep’s Smiley says about Al and Leah’s children, “but the mess is driving them crazy.” Nash told viewers that a couple had “a simple explanation for the mess – sort of.” It turned out that delayed plans for a new garage roof forced the couple to move much of their belongings out of the garage and into their house.

It could be, as Baudrillard (1996) suggests, that these individuals were collecting (or accumulating) to reconnect to the past, to “divinity, to nature, to primitive knowledge” (p. 76). For avid collectors, their items represent “absolute reality” and “symbolize an inward transcendence, that phantasy of a centre-point in reality which nourishes all mythological consciousness, all individual consciousness – that phantasy whereby a projected detail comes to stand for the ego, and the rest of the world is then organized around it” (p. 79).

The tendency to accumulate is examined in a context-free, confrontational, often accusatory manner. Participants are simply trying to get past the idea, as one former participant said in a post on the show’s bulletin board, that clutter is “just a confusing way of organizing.” This makes sense in light of the tendency of addiction treatment programs to individualize the addiction. “Why do you have such a junky room?” Nash asks eight-year-old Morgan. “Because I’m lazy and I don’t like to put things back,” she replies sheepishly. Later, Nash pointed out the need to reform Morgan since she was clearly “a baby packrat” and a “clutter monster.”

The Clean Sweep team is a bit kinder, often taking the time to explore in more detail the family-related origins of clutter. When Peter Walsh suggested in one episode, for example, that Kate and Dudley sell a cabinet, Kate explained that it had been in her house during her childhood and that her siblings had chosen her to store it. “Do you love this enough to want this in your home?” Walsh asked. “Yes,” Kate said firmly. Walsh probes a bit further. “Because you love it or because it’s a sense of obligation?” Kate laughs, and instead of continuing his exploration, Walsh looks for an immediate answer: “Come on – we’ve gotta deal with this,” he tells Kate. “I don’t
think I love it enough,” she says. A few seconds later, Kate is once again confessing her love for the cabinet. She hems and haws as the clock ticks.

Dudley has “mixed feelings” about the cabinet. The couple eventually concedes that the cabinet is so large that it did not fit in any room in their house. “Why have you kept it?” Walsh asks. Kate provides perhaps a more genuine answer: “Because we love our parents!” Now on her knees, she explains that her brother and sister want the cabinet, but she and Dudley became its caretakers. “And so I feel I must make use of it,” Kate says. Walsh instructs the couple to keep the cabinet if they truly want it, but if they don’t, “it’s a damn anchor that is just dragging you down.” The couple seems to be keeping it out of “a sense of crazy obligation – it’s clutter,” Walsh concludes.

We learn in *Clean House* that one of the guests is keeping an old copier as a memento of a failed home-based business, but the causes of its demise are never explored. The copier let[s] me know I can get out there and be that entrepreneur if I want to,” the guest told one of the organizers. Guests sometimes offer short descriptions of how they obtained an item, or of how the clutter accumulated. The problem snuck up on the guests, the hosts suggest. It could be, as Baudrillard (1994) argues, that unsuccessful interpersonal contact fueled their desire to obtain so many things. “[O]ne invests in objects all that one finds impossible to invest in human relationships,” he writes (p. 11). But this is not explored in either program.

Moreover, the explanations offered by the guests, while limited, are dismissed by the hosts. “You are a trip with baggage,” said a designer to a woman who had not unpacked a suitcase from an earlier trip. Turning to her collection of candles, he snapped, “Let me guess – you’re a candle freak.”

Inevitability of treatment

Treatment, in the form of an appearance on one of these shows, is positioned as the only way to tackle the addiction to accumulating things. Couples either get rid of items, or agree to
allow the shows’ hosts to display them more appropriately. The host of *Clean House* claimed that the show’s mission is to “rescue” families from their items. “Some people are so overwhelmed by their possessions, their only recourse is to appear on *Clean Sweep,*” noted Cass (2003). The shows suggest that these individuals have, in effect, completed their collections, or have at least realized that perhaps it is wise to stop accumulating. The sheer number of items renders them meaningless. Baudrillard notes that a completed collection “would in effect denote the death of the subject” (1994, p. 13). An appearance on this show is an attempt to put off death, if only for a short time.

These collectors are not long the “living and passionate individual[s]” who cobbled the collection together. Guests on these programs are unable to continue the “hunt,” and as a result can no longer simulate death “by envisaging it as an object, thereby warding off its menace,” as Baudrillard notes. They speak derisively about their things, and are consumed by the inertia they cause.

As a result, the hosts and their colleagues engage in amateur psychoanalysis, particularly in the first half of most episodes. Without delving too deeply into the factors that led to the accumulation of so much stuff – and the tendency to be disorganized – the organizers jump from quick diagnoses to a design-based cure.

In one poignant *Clean Sweep* segment, Peter Walsh walked Al, a former Los Angeles police officer, through memories of his time on the force. Honors earned and his dress uniform sat, unappreciated and undisplayed, in storage. “What if there was a way to honor the insignia…on this uniform in a way that was a permanent memento of this, rather than the shirt itself – how would you feel about that?” Walsh asked Al. “I think that would be great,” a grateful Al says.

A couple in another episode kept the mesh frame which kept Dudley still during his cancer treatment. Accompanied by a somber piano, Peter Walsh asks Dudley why he would want to keep the frame. “It’s my twin brother,” Dudley says. His face indicates, however, that he is not
sure. “This is really yesterday, isn’t it?” Walsh asks. It is “part of an experience in your life that you have lived through, that you have triumphed over.” He encourages the couple to “ritualize the end of this.” Earlier in the episode, Kate is cajoled into smashing dishes that she bought before she met Dudley. We see her on her knees looking through the boxes. “I never got rid of them because they are kind of symbolic of my independence,” she explains to Walsh. “You should mark the movement to a new life,” Walsh stresses. “They’re just plates.”

Moving Kate toward catharsis eventually requires a $50 offer from Walsh for the plates. “You’ve got a beautiful husband,” Walsh contends. “When was the last time you did something crazy?” Looking at the camera, Kate shouts “I’m letting go of the past!” With a loud “Ahhh,” she smashes a plate and buries her head in her hands.

Dudley’s ritual consists of setting fire to the cancer treatment frame. “Goodbye, Joe,” he says as the frame is consumed by the fire, set in a trash can. “See you later, psycho-year from hell.” The piano music is now more upbeat. He hugs Walsh and thanks him. “What’s amazing is you’ve come through to this side.” Walsh, Kate, and Dudley look skyward. “It’s a great place to be,” Walsh says.

Hosts of the programs encourage guests to think of the purge as the beginning of a lifelong devotion to organization – to think of organization as a lifestyle, or as an enhancement to one’s lifestyle. “What is the system?” Clean Sweep host Tava Smiley asks a couple. “There is no system.” Reorganization “starts with a solid plan,” she reminds viewers. “You’ve got to make a commitment today that this can no longer exist and that it can never return,” warns Clean Sweep organizer Sherrie Alexander. The couple nods. “That sounds fantastic,” says Susan. Alexander is pleased: “I love it. I love the enthusiasm.” It is unclear, however, whether guests on these programs continue to heed the directions given by the experts after the television crews have packed up and moved on.

Still, by forcing their guests to remember what their rooms looked like before the makeover (underscored in Clean House with an effect called “Clutter Cam,” which invites the
viewer to look at the now dispatched mess through what appears to be a video camera viewfinder), the hosts press their guests to keep their homes clean. “We’re not going to see any more of your toys, or any more of your clothes” in the living room, Niecy Nash warns an eight-year-old girl. The *Clean House* crew was confident that it had “taught messy Morgan the art of organizing for style’s sake.” The *Clean House* regimen caused the young girl’s mother to see the value of organization: “I appreciate what I have,” she said. “This is great.”

**Permanence**

Ironically, the hosts also express doubt as to whether their guests will be able to successfully adopt such a lifestyle. “Now that we’re here, they don’t want us to dig them out,” claimed Niecy Nash of one couple. They suggest that the tendency to accumulate items is permanent, and can only be kept at bay by adherence to the precepts explained during the show. It can never be eliminated completely. Such an approach mirrors the disease model of addiction. As Peele notes (1975, p. 142), converting an unhealthy tendency into an addiction ensures “the preeminence, pervasiveness, and persistence of sickness in everyday life.” All evidence of the “essential force of the clan,” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, p. 35), which emboldens collectors and gives them a sense of purpose, has been swept away by the participants’ own behavior. They are fully conversant in their newly discovered symptomatology, and now define themselves by this phony addiction.

“By the end of each episode,” noted one reporter (Cass, 2003), “it would be a stretch to say the couple has changed, but at least they can walk into their spare bedroom and see the floor.” Pronouncements like these support Peele’s suggestion that addiction is most often seen as an intractable, lifelong problem. At the conclusion of each *Clean House* episode, Niecy Nash underscores the severity – and the spread – of our addiction to stuff: “I know what you’re thinking: Oh, Niecy when can you come by my house? One miracle at a time, Angel – one miracle at a time.”
If one former *Clean Sweep* guest is to be believed, there are plenty of families in need of miracles. Responding to a critical post on the show’s bulletin board, the guest emphasized that the show’s crew did not stage the mess dealt with in the episode. “We…are just normal everyday people. We sleep, eat and take walks to hear the birds chirp. We raise children and do the best darn job we can to make them productive, competent adults in our troubled society. We argue with our spouses when the trash piles up and we tuck our kids in bed at night after a bedtime story. We are also "clutter bugs" looking for a better quality of life and ready for CHANGE,” the former guest wrote.

The garage sales held as part of both shows heighten the sense that there will be other people in need of help from these experts – if only because they have so cavalierly dumped items from their current “patients” on these unsuspecting buyers.

Another central theme is the conversion of simple personality quirks and relationship hurdles into full blown addictions. Michael, a power company employee, is married to Nancy, a nurse. They appeared on an episode of *Clean House*. Michael, dressed during the episode in an old military fatigue jacket and later in a Hawaiian shirt, is a free-spirited would-be artist and certain packrat; Nancy admits to being “a little stuffy and controlled and disciplined” – qualities Michael clearly lacks. These descriptions are accompanied by ominous music that recalls the scariest scenes in the movie *Jaws*.

One look at the rooms to be cleaned and redesigned gives the show’s host enough ammunition to pronounce them dysfunctional. “Opposites attract, except when it comes to clutter,” Nash contended. Michael’s collections of playbills and Frisbees, and his unwillingness to do something with a fluted column he bought some time ago are “short-circuiting his relationship” with his wife. “I cannot go out and have fun when my house looks like this,” she says. “You should be scared and ashamed,” Nash tells the couple upon observing their bedroom.

These early segments suggest that the hosts cannot possibly convince their guests to dispose of their clutter. “If it’s good enough to get 30 years ago, then it’s good enough to keep –
and have now,” Michael tells a disbelieving Clean House crew. A key subtext in both shows is the possibility that these couples will faithfully observe the tenets of organization only for a short time. But it won’t be for a lack of tools. The closet in Cary and Michelle’s bedroom is expandable, Clean House organizer Linda Koopersmith explains. “As they grow it will become a double hang instead of a triple hang,” she says.

Eventually, however, the guests see the light. Their revelation often includes a vow to undertake an activity that they have not had the time for. After looking through Leah’s scrap booking materials, Walsh realizes that she has failed to complete several photo albums. “Yes, yes, I need to…” Leah begins. “I don’t know what to say.” Walsh extracts a promise from Leah that she will not start another photo album “until the ones you have are finished.” Not only will Leah enjoy the newly arranged memories, it will keep the urge to accumulate “contained.”

Higher moral ground

The tendency of program hosts to hold guests to higher moral standards is particularly evidence when the clutter is first surveyed. “What is going on in here?” asked Alexander disapprovingly of one couple. Later, in their office, she scolds them: “This office is out of control. It is OUT OF CONTROL (her emphasis)!" Even the speed (achieved through a fast motion effect) of the team in removing the clutter suggests that the problem could have been easily fixed if the couple was ideologically equipped. In one episode, the Clean House team simply walked in to the cluttered room and stared, mouths open. “Oh, no” says the designer, who resembles the character of Chandler on Friends. “Whoa,” says another.

On the Clean Sweep bulletin board, cdnjunkie acknowledged that he or she is powerless to deal with clutter: “I am another one who shamefully hangs her head and has to admit that yes, rooms can be that bad. I have lived most of my adult life with at least one room in my house that looked as bad as, if not worse than, the rooms depicted on the shows.” Thanks to the advice offered on programs like Clean Sweep and Clean House, “there is hope for "junkies" like me.”
Progress can be slow, “and I bog down frequently but where I have made serious progress at getting things organized, it is easier to keep that area tidy.”

Viewers of *Clean Sweep* are drawn, explained one reporter, “to the show’s tough love approach to general disarray, stuffed animal collecting, and purse hoarding.” Eight-year-old Morgan is chided for having a “sinfully messy room.” Thus, guests are judged more harshly than a typical, controlled collector might be. The shows suggest that their clutter has isolated them from their family and friends. “Only people who are extremely close to use get past that front door,” said one *Clean House* guest.

Guests of the shows get a look at the higher moral ground as they sort through their items. They typically experience relief, even elation, as the items are either disposed of or sold. Susan lets out a “Yeah!” and claps as she dumps a pile of formerly important newspapers into a trash can on *Clean Sweep.* “I’ve been waiting 15 years for that.” The *Clean Sweep* designer had called the spread of newspapers “a disease.” Indeed, the failure of these couples to recognize their addiction to clutter – and the power of revelation – is a key theme in both shows.

In some instances, the shows cause guests to seek higher moral ground occupied before their items overtook their lives. Walsh asks Al, the former police officer, about a collection of mementos from his career on the force. “Let’s deal with this because this is important stuff for you,” he says, “but it doesn’t feel like it’s completely in the light.” Walsh holds up a photo of Al standing inside the open door of his police car. “What was this guy thinking?” Al begins to cry. “You know what I see when I look at this man? I see a proud guy who’s great at his job. This is the kind of photo I’d want my sons to look at and be proud of,” Walsh concludes. Walsh asks Al not to be sad about leaving the job. “What is the greatest thing in your life today?” Al tells Walsh it is his wife, Leah. “Without a doubt,” he adds. Leah, now reaching out to Al, recalls how proud he was to be a police officer. “[Y]ou still have that,” she says, “you’re just not standing in a police car.” Thus, only with the aid of these would-be addiction counselors are Al and Leah able to reclaim these memories.
In the end, however, the renovated rooms (in both shows) are the source of a new morality for the guests. Not only are the rooms more organized – so are their memories. They are now responsible for keeping both free of clutter. Emboldened by this new morality, guests can resume activities derailed by clutter. Nancy is thrilled that what was supposed to be Michael’s art studio is now fully functional. “Don’t you feel you can create something in here now?” Nash asks him. “It’s something he’s wanted to do for a long time,” an appreciate Nancy says. The hosts ask couples to remember what their rooms were like prior to these interventions. “That desk was a bomb site,” says a Clean Sweep designer. “Remember Al and Leah’s jam-packed office? Now it’s a highly organized space where they both have room to work,” says Tava Smiley, leading off a final segment of Clean Sweep.

Along the way, the newly renovated rooms are made to seem like museums, with exhibits that highlight life before things took over, and which suggest a new direction. “Both Al and Leah are honored in that space,” said Peter Walsh about the couple’s new office, which includes a small shrine to Al’s work on the police force. The couples who appear on both shows realize that they have wandered down the wrong path. After being introduced to the twin gospels of organization and design, they rediscover each other and a new morality that will shape their lives from this point on. Even their children are affected. Cary and Michelle’s son, Tyler, tells his parents “I don’t want clutter” at the end of a Clean House episode. “A man after my own heart,” gushes Niecy Nash. “I love the fact that you don’t want clutter anymore.”

CONCLUSIONS

The theme of addiction seen in these programs is part of what I believe is a broader tendency in the mass media to suggest that we can become addicted to practically anything. As if employed by an addiction treatment program, the hosts of these shows first educate participants about the symptoms of their addiction. Only after participants master this information are they “treated” by experts like Walsh and Alexander. For his part, Walsh excoriates individuals who
“excuse sloppy homes as some kind of syndrome.” True to today’s fascination with “boot camp”-style interventions, Walsh told a reporter that “labeling this situation as a disorder – it’s a cop-out” (Donahue, 2005, p. 6D). Yet Walsh and the hosts of these programs do indeed treat their guests as if they have a disorder. The programs suggest that these individuals would never have been able to conquer their addiction on their own, and that theirs will be a lifelong struggle against what in actuality amounts to a socially unacceptable behavior.

Along the way, hosts rarely, if ever, explore why their guests have accumulated so much stuff. In true Alcoholics Anonymous fashion, environmental causes are listed, but rarely explored. Evidence is usually circumstantial – in the case of Kate and Dudley’s struggle to get past Dudley’s cancer, powerfully circumstantial – and is presented only to reaffirm for participants the authority of the experts. Further, participants are encouraged to go on consuming after their addiction is controlled, but they must do a better job of organizing the items that they buy. News coverage of these programs often focuses on the couples who are unable to make this change. Their return to clutter is referred to as “recidivism,” as if they were trying to avoid additional prison time.

The experts never explore the possibility that one should buy, or consume, only out of need. To be sure, their guests might not immediately master this idea, but it seems counterproductive for the experts to suggest that their problem can be solved simply by toning down their desires to consume and organizing more effectively. This tendency supports Peele’s contention that addiction is permanent. Guests on these programs may be better organized, but they will always be addicted – as defined by the experts – to accumulation.

The shows play right into the journalist’s tendency to treat behavioral problems as addictions. Such an approach guarantees that the reporter will produce more compelling copy or video footage. As mentioned in the introduction, waiting for a couple to make the decision to clean out their house and take their unwanted items to a Goodwill center would not be a thematically compelling centerpiece for a television show, or a powerful lead for a news story.
Journalists seek conflict and drama; these shows create conflict and drama by elevating a quirk—an oversight—into an addiction. I see a parallel in the tendency of reporters to medicalize behavioral issues related to eating disorders; it is possible, claim reporters, to “contract” an eating disorder of varying degrees, and often by simply watching too much television, awash in images of thin, successful people.

The meaning of the items, of the act of accumulating the items, is explored, but often dismissed. These meanings are displaced by the larger twin goals of improved organization and functional, yet stylish, design. The ideology drawn from these programs also suggests that even a modestly successful effort to reorganize one’s life can only be mounted with the help of experts. Like the guests in these shows, we must take advantage of the opportunity to “learn from wonders” (as a former guest gushed on the Clean Sweep bulletin board) like Walsh, Nash, and Alexander.
REFERENCES


