

## Hoarding Behaviour and Deprivation Experienced in Early Life in Indian Families: A Qualitative Study

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This study aims to understand the realities of hoarders in India who have experienced significant material deprivation in their early childhood during the post-independence period. Using a convenience sampling method, ten adults in the age group of 45-82 years from Bhubaneswar, India, were included as part of the sample. Thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews conducted led to overarching themes which include deprivation experienced during the early childhood years, parental pressure to value things and not waste them, the perception that less is more, the struggle to make ends meet, the acquired habit of storing items, the urge and the anxiety associated with working hard to amass material wealth and hoarding materials despite better economic conditions. This study has implications for mental health professionals in understanding hoarding behaviour in the Indian context.

**Keywords:** Hoarding, Deprivation, Qualitative Study, Thematic Analysis, Indian Families

The behavior of excessive acquisition of materials is called "hoarding." Collecting and storing items is common and seen in many species. It is part of our preservation instincts (Cherrier & Ponnor, 2010; Mandal, 2012). However, the compulsive urge to save items regardless of their actual value accompanied by extreme distress in discarding them is considered dysfunctional (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Kaplan & Sadock, 1988). This difficulty in letting go of objects and failure to organize it results in clutter. Excessive clutter in the house restricts functional use of the rooms and impairs basic activities such as cooking, cleaning, repairing work, finding important documents, and even sleeping (Mahnke et al., 2021; Tolin et al., 2013; Tompkins & Hartl, 2009). Further, it increases the risk of falls, injuries, getting trapped under the junk, fire hazards, pest infestation, damage to the property, dust accumulation, and poor air quality

(Cappelletti et al., 2019; Donnelly, 2015; Fleury et al., 2012; Mathews, 2020). When the risk extends to the neighborhood, it also leads to legal consequences (Kumar, 2019).

Some of the everyday hoarded items include papers, magazines, flyers, bills, clothes, shoes, plastic bags, cardboards, boxes, containers, tools, nails, screws, household supplies, food, animals, and other waste products (Bubrick et al., 2004; Kaplan & Sadock, 1988; Mathews, 2020). Individuals with hoarding behavior are excessively attached and are sensitive to their accumulated items. They often get anxious (Vilaverde et al., 2017) and angry (Bubrick et al., 2004) towards members of the family who demand to get rid of the possessions. Also, being forced to live in the clutter with no functional space is distressing for family members living with the hoarder. In most cases, family members of the hoarders seek medical help as they feel depressed,

frustrated, and angry (Bubrick et al., 2004; Leiter, 2019).

Earlier individuals with hoarding behavior received clinical attention when presented with other mental health conditions, particularly obsessive-compulsive disorder (Jaisoorya et al., 2021; Mathews, 2014; Tolin, 2011). But the interest in the concept increased in the mental health community after it was identified as a different mental health condition in DSM-5. Despite the growing interest, very little is known about the etiology of this disorder. Generally, people hoard because of the functional (Vilaverde et al., 2017) and emotional value (Cherrier & Ponnor, 2010) attached to the object. However, a recent meta-analytic study identified genes, parts of the brain, and traumatic life events as causal factors for hoarding behavior (Hombali et al., 2019).

Genetic studies show individuals with pathological hoarding tendencies tend to have at least one first-degree relative with the hoarding behavior (Kaplan & Sadock, 1988).

Studies reporting traumatic life events as a factor associated with hoarding include interpersonal trauma such as domestic violence, loss of loved ones, neglect in childhood as well as stressful events involving accidents, natural disasters, war, and life-threatening illness (Dozier & Ayers, 2017; Grisham et al., 2006; Shaw et al., 2016; Stumpf et al., 2018). Material deprivation during childhood is also related to the emergence of hoarding symptoms (Chiu et al., 2003; Zasio, 2011). Several excerpts from different interviews provide evidence for the link between poverty (material deprivation) and compulsive hoarding of less valued items ("Connecting Domestic Hoarding & Poverty," 2016; Harmon, 2012; Thorpe, 2020). However, there also have been contradictory findings to material deprivation as a cause for

hoarding (Landau et al., 2011). Intolerance of uncertainty is also associated with hoarding severity (Castriotta et al., 2019; Ivanov et al., 2020; Oglesby et al., 2013; Wheaton et al., 2016). Therefore, hoarding was common during wars and the great depression (Tress, 2016). Hoarders constantly worry regarding their property or belongings being taken away. This suggests individuals who had experienced severe deprivation and scarcity in life have learned the valuable lesson to save small items as they constantly live with the sense of fear of experiencing another extreme life-threatening condition (Bubrick et al., 2004).

The economic condition of India post-independent was critical. Around 70% of people were below the poverty line at the time of Independence (Abay, 2014). Since hoarding behavior is common in India (Jaisoorya et al., 2021), it is crucial to study the lived experience of hoarders in India and its significant association with the financial hardship faced during post-independence.

Thus, in this study, we attempt to understand the realities of adults who indulge in hoarding behavior and have experienced the post-Independence era of economic instability in India. We also intend to reduce the inconsistency in the findings of several studies and establish that "hoarding" might be an expected behavior in people who have experienced financial hardships in their early life. Besides, studies on hoarding in India are few and primarily administered on the clinical population. So, this study will also contribute to the advancement of research in this field.

## **Method**

### **Research design**

A qualitative approach was adapted to conduct this study in Bhubaneswar, India. A qualitative research design allows the participants to answer questions about experience, meaning, and perspective from

their standpoint (Hammarberg et al., 2016). A multiple case study method was used to collect data on hoarding experiences from the participants for two reasons. Firstly, it enables the researchers to analyse data within each situation and across different situations, and secondly, evidence generated from this method is considered strong and reliable (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Therefore, a qualitative multiple case study was regarded as the best choice for this research.

### Researcher description

The first author, R, and the second author, A, were undergraduate students from the Department of Psychology who were beginners in qualitative research. They were supervised and trained by the third author, V, and the fourth author, P, in conducting interviews and analysis. The third and fourth authors were experienced researchers.

Table 1. Socio-demographic details of the participants.

Case No.	Name	Gender	Age	Education	Profession	Reasons for pursuing a early job	Items collected
1	Polly	Female	47	Has done a vocational course on ticketing	Works as an executive in a travel agency for almost 30 years	To meet economic needs of the family of 4 brothers and sisters	Plastic bags, papers, polythene bags
2	Bhairavi	Female	50	Post-graduation on correspondence	Worked as early 18 years	To meet economic needs of the family of 4 brothers and sisters	Clothes, Tiffin boxes , polythene bags, plastic bags
3	Palavi	Female	49	Post-graduation	Worked as early 18 years	To meet economic needs of the family of 4 brothers and sisters	Bottles of all kinds , Tiffin boxes
4	Ravi	Male	48	Worked for a short period of time after the 12 grade exams to contribute to the finance in the family	Manager in a company	Economic necessity	Used bottles, polythene bags
5	Malati	Female	75	Literate till class 5	Housewife	-----	New clothes stacked for years and unused ,bed sheets , plastic bags, polythene bags
6	Nibedita	Female	50	Graduate	Housewife	-----	Utensils, Clothes, Bottles, Cans, Medicine boxes
7	Anita	Female	45	(10+2)	Housewife And tutoring children	-----	Utensils, Polythene bags, Papers, Bottles, Boxes, Old Question Papers, Books

8	Indumati	Female	76	Literate till class 5	Housewife	-----	Bottles, Medicine boxes, Polythene bags, Utensils, Clothes
9	Mohan	Male	82	Matriculate	Retired Govt Employee	Burdened with family responsibility because of loss of a parent	Gold Ornaments, Pens, Watches, Electronics, Clothes, Spare parts
10	Sreedhar	Male	79	MA.LLB	Retired Govt Employee	To meet the economic needs of the family i.e., mother, father, 3 brothers and a sister	Bottles, Cans, Pieces of clothes, Papers, Pens, Plastics, Electronic items, Machinery parts, Books

\*Names of the participants have been changed to hide the identity

### Participants

The participants' details are reported in Table 1. The study included ten adults, three males and seven females aged between 45-82yrs. All the participants engaged in collecting items of less value and reported distress and anger when asked to get rid of them. All the participants belong to middle income-groups, are permanent residents of Bhubaneswar, India, and speak Odia language.

### Researcher participant relationship

The researchers used the purposive sampling method. They selected samples through friends and family members. Selected participants were given instructions about the nature and purpose of the study before the interview. The researchers who acted as the interviewers-built rapport with the interviewees, which facilitated the interview sessions. The study's objective was

explained to the participants. Doubts regarding the study were also clarified before initiating the interview.

### Participants

To assess hoarding behavior in the participants, saving inventory-revised (SI-R) (Frost et al., 2004) was administered. Participants scoring 41 or above were included in the study. Researchers estimated a sample size including 12 participants. However, interviews were conducted on ten individuals and stopped when no new responses were being generated, indicating data saturation (Saunders et al., 2018).

A total of 13 participants were approached for the study. Two participants were excluded as they did not meet the scoring criteria for hoarding behavior as mentioned in the saving inventory revised tool, and one participant did not volunteer to participate in the study.

### **Data Collection:**

To have a rich understanding of participant's hoarding behavior, an in-depth interview was conducted. For this study, face-to-face qualitative interviews were conducted with all the participants. The researchers developed an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions and a list of possible probing questions. The interview included discussion regarding hoarding items, timeline related to when it started, reasons behind the hoarding behavior, anxiety associated with the behavior, and difficulties in decision making. To know the background of the participants, a structured socio-demographic sheet was prepared by the researchers. The first and the second authors were trained to conduct and facilitate the interview to elicit information of a consistent type. A mock interview was conducted before the actual interview under the supervision of the third and fourth authors. The interview sessions with all the participants were pre-arranged at the participant's residence on a mutually agreed day and time in a separate and quiet room. The first and second author took interviews of five participants. The interview for other five participants was taken by the third author. The interviews took place in the Odia language. The interview session for the individual participants lasted between 120 to 180 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis took place through thematic analysis, which is a method used to code the contents of an interview in a meaningful way to identify patterns or themes within qualitative data. The inductive thematic analysis enabled the researchers to code the interview content and comprehensively examine the experience of research participants. It helped to highlight and summarize the key features (Nowell et al., 2017).

The analysis took place in six steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first step, the data collected from five cases were transcribed by the first and second author, and the third author transcribed data collected from the other five cases. The audio-recorded interview was listened to several times to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. The transcripts were thoroughly read and re-read by all the authors. In the second step, the authors generated codes by breaking down the data and highlighted all the potential codes. The codes generated were grouped, and themes were developed in the third step. In the next step, the themes were reviewed and finalized. The fifth step involved labelling the themes and defining them in the context of the research. Further, the statements by the participants were converted to quotes that were consistent with the overarching themes. In the final step, report writing began by the authors.

### **Method**

In a qualitative study, analysts are the "research tools". The biases they hold should always be considered as that might affect the research process and study results (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Therefore, to ensure the study's credibility and dependability, several steps were taken. Research meetings were organized to discuss any questions, queries, or ideas about the study during the entire research process for at least two hours every week. During the interview process, the interviewers reflected upon and summarized each response in her own words to ensure a proper understanding of the participant's responses. Also, during data analysis, the codes and emerging themes were systematically reviewed by all the researchers. Any divergence of opinions among the researchers regarding coding, defining, and naming of the emerging themes were discussed.

## Results

Using thematic analysis, seven themes were identified: Deprivation experienced during the early childhood years, parental pressure to value things and not waste them, the perception that less is more, the struggle to make ends meet, the acquired habit of storing items, the urge and the anxiety associated with working hard to amass material wealth and hoarding material things despite better economic conditions. In addition, the adults also exhibited anxiety as a typical response to discarding these items.

### Deprivation experienced during the early childhood years

When asked about their childhood experiences, almost all the participants shared that they had grown up struggling to have a proper meal a day. Families with parents who lived during the post-independence era had gone through a lot of financial hardships.

Sreedhar said, *"The times were tough. Even buying basic items such as clothes were considered luxury"*.

Participants in the study also reported that they started to work early in their life due to financial problems. They felt that it was their responsibility to help meet the family's financial needs. The first-born particularly took up jobs early, at around 18 years, to contribute to the finances and help their siblings study. Mohan stated, *"I took up a job as soon as I completed my 10<sup>th</sup> standard so that I could help my brother study"*. Bhairavi said, *"I took up a vocational course to help meet the family's financial needs as daddy's salary was only 5rs a month, and we were so many of us"*. Some of the participants shared that it was challenging for them to even live on a daily basis.

Bhairavi also stated that she continued with higher studies while working to upgrade her skills and look for higher-paid jobs.

### Parental pressure to value things and not waste them

The participants also reported that their parents were cautious in spending and also disciplined their children to value things even as trivial as empty packets and boxes. They taught them to save it and not throw so that the item could be put into other use. Malati says, *"I used to count the no. of match stick that I would use in a day and count up to three sticks a day to light the chullah. I have taught my children the same. They have to use two pencils a month, use it till the lead is finished. They have to learn because we cannot spend much and buy new things. See, this utensil of mine has lasted me 45 years of my marriage (showing the tea can and the plastic container with tea leaves stored in it)"*. Ravi said, *"We lived in one room, all of us, brothers and sisters, till my father retired from his job here. We used the same vessels for years together and were very careful in storing them properly. Even our personal things such as pencils, shirts would be used till it was worn out. Mama (mother) was very particular that we kept them clean and used them properly."*

### The perception that less is more

During childhood, participants observed the saving behavior of their parents. This helped them understand that even the little things they have in their houses, such as a utensil or a polythene bag, are precious and need to be preserved. Hence, they also valued the stored items such as empty packets and boxes, and possession of those things like even their own clothes is sufficient and more than what they need. Anita says, *"I have seen my parents save things for future use, and that is how I have learned to save any item."*

Bhairavi says, *"I have seen maa (mother) split one fat broom into two and save that one for the next month, or when one is*

*overused, she will take out the second one. Similarly, she would do that even with detergent soaps. She would split them into two or even three pieces and save them for later use. I do that even now; I make maximum use of a thing because I have learned little is more, and that is how I can save money."*

### **The struggle to make ends meet**

The clients learned that they could not afford many comforts as they knew that their father was the only earning member and earned only 5rs-7rs a month, so they struggled to make ends meet. Ravi says, *"I have always walked to school or walked halfway and then taken a bus to save money. We were given only five sets of clothes a year".* Nivedita says, *"she was not allowed to study after graduation because of financial difficulty."*

### **Acquired Habit of Storing Things**

Having observed their parents saving things of little value over the years, the participants also acquired the habit of saving all kinds of material things. As adults, they have hoarded different items of little value despite better economic conditions. All of it has resulted in clutter at home and leaving little living space. The researcher observed that the clients had dumped a lot of things on a bed in the living room so that when it comes to using the bed for sleeping purposes, the client shared that they make space by moving items on top of each other and use that little space to lay their head and take rest.

### **The urge and the anxiety associated with working hard to amass material wealth**

Most adults went through a lot of anxiety concerning their struggle during their childhood years and wanted to end this struggle by working hard. Hence, some of them started an early career as early as 15, especially the 75 and 82-year-old adults. All

of them have worked hard to get a promising career. Besides, years of experience have made them go through the emotional conflict of consistently spending only on necessities and being careful about their expenses and not afford anything for their comfort. Their frustration was evident in making many sacrifices, taking on responsibility as early as their teenage years.

### **Hoarding Materials Despite Better Economic Conditions**

The clients confessed that the hoarding behavior continued and became intense over the years despite holding good jobs and collected items of little value for the only reason they could come for future use. Anita confessed, *"I keep these items because you never know when they could come for future use."* The researcher also noticed that Malati had her entire cupboard stacked with new but unused shawls and bedsheets and refused to part with them even if any family member wanted to use them. This was her newfound item of hoarding. Bharavi now collects craft items, and an entire room was full of them, never discards any item lest she needs it anytime.

Thus, saving is not restricted to worthless or worn-out things, but many saved items are new and never used.

In addition, it was also noticed that the adults displayed emotional conflict in having to part with these items. There was a lot of verbal spat exchanged when the family members initiated discussions concerning the throwing away of items that were of little use. This was a familiar scene, especially in Malati's house, because things that were needed, such as important documents, were never found. Therefore, the discussion of throwing away unnecessary things, leading to a routine interaction of do's and don'ts spelled out by every family member but in vain as nothing would change in the house.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore hoarding behaviour in Indians who have experienced significant material deprivation in their early childhood during post-independence period. Through this study we found that items hoarded by the participants include boxes, plastic bags, containers, clothes, watches. Findings from other countries suggest these are some of the commonly hoarded items (Bubrick et al., 2004; Kaplan & Sadock, 1988; Mathews, 2020). All the participants in our study reported feeling anxious while discarding the items. Since interviews were conducted in the participant's home, researchers identified the rooms of the houses were cluttered, specifically the kitchen room and participant's bedroom. In bedrooms, items were kept unorganized on tables, under the bed, in a side corner on the floor, and inside the wardrobe. Family members of some participants also showed the clutter in the kitchen room. In some families, a specific storage room was created to keep items of less value. Family members of the participants also expressed their distress with the hoarding behavior of the individual. They expressed their willingness to throw the items but failed as they did not want to upset the participant.

The findings of the study also revealed, all the participants despite their better economic conditions still engage in hoarding behaviour due to material deprivation experienced in childhood. Participants had to take up jobs early to contribute to the family's income and underwent extreme hardship to save little money. They also mentioned how they learnt from their parents to use items resourcefully. When asked why do, they indulge in hoarding? Almost all the participants believed that the item might be useful in the future, suggesting their readiness to face uncertainties. This

provides strong evidence that intolerance of uncertainty is linked with hoarding severity (Castriotta et al., 2019; Ivanov et al., 2020; Oglesby et al., 2013; Wheaton et al., 2016). Thus, living in such harsh conditions and parental pressure made the adults value items that extended to hoarding behavior despite changing economic conditions. Hence, this study explains how deprivation experienced during the post-independence era leads to the emergence of hoarding symptoms and is passed down through generations.

There is a limitation to this study. Researchers recognized slight apprehension amongst the participants while sharing their experiences, which might affect the data credibility. Despite the limitation, the present research has enhanced our understanding regarding the hoarding behavior seen in Indian families. The use of qualitative research provided rich data that explained the study's objective well; however, future studies can use a bigger sample size and select samples from different parts of the country to shed light on the generalizability of the findings. Future research can also focus on the role of vicarious learning in hoarding behavior.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to understand the hoarding experiences of Indian adults who have undergone severe deprivation during the post-independence era in their early life. An in-depth interview was conducted, and through thematic analysis, seven themes emerged which included, deprivation experienced during the early childhood years, parental pressure to value things and not waste them, the perception that less is more, the struggle to make ends meet, the acquired habit of storing items, the urge and the anxiety associated with working hard to amass material wealth and hoarding material things despite better



economic conditions. Further, this study also highlighted on the role of learning in hoarding behavior. This study reduces the inconsistency in several studies' findings and establishes that "hoarding" might be an expected behavior in people who have experienced financial hardships in their early life. In addition, the study has implications for mental health professionals and the general community in understanding hoarding behavior. It also attempts to expand the knowledge base of the clinicians, which will help them refine intervention strategies. The study also helps enrich the Indian research pool on hoarding.

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