Archivists’ Personal Collecting Behaviors and Their Impact on Professional Archival Practice

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2024 SAA Research Forum
Research Questions

• Are individual collecting behaviors a response to, or extension of, family collecting behaviors?
• Do family collecting practices influence one’s decision to enter the archival field?
• Do archivists tend to grow up in certain collecting environments (hoarding, saving, organized, niche)?
• Does the completion of an LIS program change one’s relationship to collecting?
• How much does one’s personal collecting preferences influence one’s professional practice?
Significance for Information Studies

• Most of what ends up at archives comes from individual and family collections (Kretalic, et al)

• Just like the social convoy, the “material convoy” travels with one over time and traverses many different kinds of relationships (Ekerdt)

• Collecting is an everyday practice, yet most of the research on collecting up until recently has couched it using psychological extremes (Dillon)
Research Methods/Parameters

• Online Survey
  • 147 responses, 97 complete

• One-on-one Interviews
  • 8 participants
  • Included students, recent graduates, working professionals, and a retired professional

• Mainly focused on physical rather than digital collections
Survey Results

How would you best describe the place where you work/volunteer? Check all that apply.

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Survey Results

What job duties do you enjoy the most? Check all that apply

- Collections processing
- Accessioning material
- Deaccessioning material
- Archival curation
- Archival preservation
- Programming and outreach
- Other (please describe)
Survey Results

How would you best describe your collecting behavior to somebody else?

- Minimalist ("I don't hold on to much ephemera")
- Maximalist ("I keep everything!")
- Specialist ("I collect rare Georgian manuscripts")
- Other (please describe)
- Not applicable (please explain)
Survey Results

How would you best describe your family’s collecting behavior?

- Minimalist ("They have a few photo boxes but not much else")
- Maximalist ("They keep every single holiday card they receive")
- Specialized ("My aunt collects Dalmatian figurines")
- It varies from person to person (please describe)
- Other (please explain)
- Not applicable (please explain)
Survey Excerpts

• “My family was military, so collecting was kept to a minimum out of necessity for a long time. Afterwards, some of us responded by hanging on to everything, others kept up a more curated collecting habit”

• “I'd say we used to collect more, but after my mother's parents passed away she realized the burden of going through households of belongings and has seriously downsized.”

• “my immediate family is the ‘keep nothing’ type or the ‘give it to (me), she's the professional’ type”
Interview Responses

• Intergenerational collecting practices
  • Same kind of collecting between parent and child
  • Inverse collecting behavior – as a response to parental collecting
  • Amalgamation of divergent parental collecting behaviors

• Personal/Professional Overlaps
  • Approach to personal collections carries over into professional settings and vice versa
    • Both inversely and directly correlated
Emergent Questions

• Do archivists’ personal collecting behaviors significantly differ from non-archivists?

• Are archivists’ inherently caretakers of familial belongings, or are they assigned that role within the family because of their training?

• How will personal and intergenerational collecting practices shift with the move toward predominantly digital materials?

• How does the current demographic make-up of the professional field factor into this research? Who is left out when discussing intergenerational collecting?