FROM WHITE GLOVES TO WHITE COATS: A CALL FOR PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN ARCHIVISTS AND HOARDING PSYCHOLOGISTS

BY LEAH BROADDUS

ABSTRACT: With a wary eye on future expectations for American archives and archivists, this article examines informal appraisal and selection evaluations in society at large through the prism of hoarding psychology. With examples of self-storage and E-mail hoarding trends culled from popular news sources, and calling attention to psychological studies revealing that clinical compulsive hoarders make “normal” appraisal judgments but over-inclusive selection decisions, this article posits that a study of hoarding therapies might benefit archivists who rely in part on the retention decisions of creators and collectors.

When it comes to selecting materials, modern archivists are frequently called on to separate proverbial “wheat” from wheat, “chaff” aside. There seems to be an ever-increasing need to be more selective as budgets for staff and available storage space shrink. The art of appraisal may be codified in local policies and professional literature, with roughly hewn rubrics of “value” dependent upon form, function, association, context, or intrinsic qualities for many collecting areas, and an appraisal task may even be outsourced to a subject specialist or colleague. But selection ultimately relies on individual human evaluative responses.¹

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, archivists have debated their role as records selectors and appraisers, rather than strictly records retainers, and as active instead of passive collectors. They have reconsidered and rearranged many collecting and appraisal concepts. The fundamental building blocks of those concepts have been the shared social/psychological ideas of the communal value of objects, the biases of records retainers and organizers, the nature of the future human need for records, and the past experience of archivists with the completeness or incompleteness of the historical record. Because sociocultural and psychological undertones underlie the big archival questions, a useful intersection might be found between archival selection theory and the social science and psychology of individuals who are hoarders. Psychological research in this realm, while not yet extensive, can be of use to archivists,
both as an aid to understanding and directing retention trends in the public at large and in developing personal strategies for making selections post appraisal, defending the selections, and learning to predict changing values over time.

Compulsive hoarding is the opposite of the ideal that most archivists hold of their selection processes, but its symptoms trace the boundaries of what every archives must confront daily. Psychologists Randy Frost and Rachel Gross first described compulsive hoarding as “acquisition of and failure to discard possessions that appear to be useless or of limited value.” Two years later, Frost and Tamara Hartl amended the definition to limit it by two crucial additional elements: “(2) living spaces sufficiently cluttered so as to preclude activities for which those spaces were designated; and (3) significant distress or impairment in functioning caused by the hoarding.” Similarly, the modern mission of the archivist has evolved from merely collecting to explicit statements about the responsibility to organize records and make what is collected accessible.

What Have We Been Keeping?

According to the hoarding model, the decision point that separates hoarding from archival collecting might be how much of what should be saved can in fact reasonably be saved and made accessible. In the archival world, just as in society at large, collecting “everything” is not necessarily hoarding under this model. While it may seem inherently excessive to save everything that ever belonged to a contemporary person, or anything that might tell a story about a contemporary organization, there are obviously some historical cases where the records are so significant that it is appropriate and might in fact provide a paradise for researchers.

A hoarder is primarily called a “hoarder” because of a failure to fit the collected goods in an organized manner into his or her designated living space. The hoarder’s selection decision is only “wrong” insofar as it conflicts with the reality of the hoarder’s ongoing living conditions. If the would-be hoarder is a millionaire who has 40 homes to fill, it is not a clinical disorder for him or her to collect and organize the plenitude of items of whatever odd nature to fill them. However, when the houses are full, he or she must either buy another home, stop collecting, or weed the collections. If buying new homes begins to interfere with the financial ability to subsist, the collector may or may not potentially have a compulsive buying/acquisition habit, but it is not a compulsive hoarding habit unless he or she resorts to cluttering the existing spaces. In hoarding psychology, as in archives, it is a matter of weighing the frequently overlooked costs of saving against the potential retrospective costs of discarding.

The archival community has been quick to realize that exclusively using cost-benefit methodologies to drive appraisal can cause problems. In some cases it can restrict underfunded or unpopular issues from garnering historical representation. But the other side of that coin is over-representation. A collection that might be appraised at low historical value may be “rescued” by the attachment of financial incentives from a small group or an individual.

For an example, consider the “time capsule” collection of iconic American artist Andy Warhol. According to an article by archivist and Warhol museum interim manager John
W. Smith in 1996, Andy Warhol’s famous time capsule boxes were originally “used to simplify a move from Warhol’s studio at 33 Union Square West to a new location at 860 Broadway.”5 That was in 1974.

Warhol did not stop filling time capsules until he died in 1987. Over those thirteen years, he time-capsuled, or “cleared from his desk on a regular basis”6 into boxes labeled by date, an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 objects. Because Warhol was, apart from these collections, an artist and pop-art icon, the boxes will no doubt continue to be retained and organized for research, and likely at a very high cost to the institution that houses them. According to the archivist who curates the time capsule box collection, it would take “four people working full-time for fifty years” to finish inventorying the boxes.7 That is, four careers of four people will be spent documenting thirteen years of the single career of another. The contents, while often of very little value individually, are appraised at a higher value by society due to their association with a collector of great importance, whose work as an artist was tied closely to his collecting habits. Warhol’s estate, artwork, popularity, and name recognition together generate resources and funds sufficient to reasonably support nonexclusive selection of materials.

There is no guarantee that funding for one collection or activity, like Warhol’s, would, if circumstances were different, be made available for the preservation of other collections or activities. So any potential social “harm” done by inserting a well-funded hoard into the collective historical record is difficult to specify in purely financial terms.

Where Have We Kept It?

According to a summary of two sets of survey data offered in *College and University Archives: Readings in Theory and Practice*, backlogs in most archives are steadily growing.8 With each passing year, more material is coming in than is being processed. Training a population of record creators to recognize and organize the most potentially significant material in their own collections prior to archival acquisition is thus time well spent. For a profession still firm in its respect for “original order,” some selection and arrangement decisions are already in the hands of creators. A certain level of meaningful organization has traditionally been assumed as the norm, and archives are staffed according to that paradigm.

But if hoarding behaviors in society at large increase, this could result in greater pressures for archives to retain a less selective, less discriminate proportion of society’s contemporary records. If some sorting and culling is not done well before collections are brought to the archives, the ratio of staff to materials can quickly get out of control.

As evidence of the population’s increasing need to retain more and more, one need only look to the self-storage industry, the unofficial personal archives of the nation. The Self Storage Association’s “Self Storage Industry Fact Sheet” for 2007 boasts that “it took the self storage industry more than 25 years to build its first billion square feet of space” but that “it added the second billion square feet in just 8 years (1998–2005).”9 According to a *New York Times* article by Suzanne Gannon, “11 million American households currently rent storage space, an increase of 90 percent since 1995.”10
Among the other interesting facts given on the “Self Storage Industry Fact Sheet” are the following:11

- “fastest-growing sector of the United States commercial real estate industry over the period of the last 30 years.”
- “83.9 percent of all US counties . . . have at least one ‘primary’ self storage facility.”
- “There are 6.86 sq. ft. of self storage for every man woman and child in the nation; thus it is physically possible that every American could stand—all at the same time—under the total canopy of self storage roofing.”
- “1 in 10 US households . . . currently rent a self storage unit.”

There could be many explanations for the increase in the need to maintain belongings in self-storage units. It could be that the simple fact of increased mobility and increased rates of divorce/marriage or other family adjustments is enough to account for most of the space increases. “The demand drivers of storage are events that occur in people’s lives—lifestyle changes such as births and deaths and marriages and divorces and business expansion and business contraction.”12 Renting one space may also act as a “gateway” to renting others.13 It could be that individuals believe archives do not adequately preserve enough of their collections. Or it could be a subtle shift in the appraisal-selection rubric of the community at large—a decrease in the psychological ability to make space-conscious selection decisions founded on individual appraisals.

**How Can We Keep It Up?**

It is not only physical storage of paper and artifacts that has costs. Electronic document storage also has costs. As David Bearman pointed out in 1989, the costs of infinite retention are equally infinite. Bearman argued that archivists must eventually “develop tactics for requiring offices to keep adequate documentation, rather than trying to review what they have kept to locate an adequate record.”14 The issue of E-mail retention is instructive of the need for such tactics.

At a recent presentation, Daniel W. Jones from Honda America Manufacturing spoke about a successful E-mail records retention system that used the approach Bearman described. The instructional focus of the presentation was not the technology used to store the E-mails themselves, or the selection criteria used by the records manager, but rather the innovative methods by which the corporation was able to train, compel, and enforce its constituents’ engagement in creator-driven sorting of personal incoming and outgoing E-mails on a scheduled basis. It was not so much the E-mail management technology that must be improved that fueled the Honda representative’s presentation, but rather the assertion that the human beings who created and received the documents needed to be trained and motivated to make retention decisions supportable by the space limitations that meet the functional/legal/historical requirements of the institution.15

The same is true of the excellent Preservation of Electronic Mail Collaboration Initiative (EMCAP)16 schema developed with funding by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), which makes it possible for archivists to parse and store individual E-mail accounts. Following this schema, with minimal training, contemporary E-mail account holders sort and designate their own individual
E-mails as “historical” before they are electronically turned over to the archivist for management and preservation.

Institutional archives that actively collect contemporary material are already confronting the issues that surround other kinds of digital-born documents and records. Institutional digital repositories have not yet become the primary storage space for digital-born records, though they have made strides with academic drafts, article manuscripts, and subject-specific projects. But the bulk of electronic record storage spaces consist of scattered servers, hard drives, and temporary storage devices with little built-in metadata. The costs of maintaining those massive, unselective collections of digitized or born-digital material have only begun to manifest themselves.

In many public offices and state-supported institutions, the ultimate cost of unselective storage schemes for digital-born records may be heavy for the archives that inherit these documents, however microscopic these documents may physically be. A Missouri study found “that it could cost more than $1 million to keep backup copies of the hundreds of thousands of e-mails that get sent and received daily by government workers . . . plus around $250,000 a year to maintain [them].” Some criticized the use of state funds for E-mail retention and wanted to know if the state was being responsible about deleting irrelevant E-mails. But others, for understandable political reasons, believed that the state should retain everything indefinitely, in order to avoid violating the state public records laws or recoloring history. Government documents, clearly, are a distinct case, but the habit of storing E-mail indefinitely is pervasive. If the average creator and personal records manager does not tag and sort digital records or cull non-records on an ongoing basis, both the size of the task and the cost of doing either weeding or sorting at the archival stage will simply continue to mount in a manner disproportionate to the number of archivists.

Enter the Therapists

Dr. Randy Frost has coauthored two clinician’s manuals for working with hoarding patients. For an archivist, they are interesting to read not so much for the clinical aspects as for the social and introspective ones because our jobs compel us to collect to the very verge of our means, and frequently a little beyond. The first, *Buried in Treasures*, is written for use as a patient’s workbook. The second, *Compulsive Hoarding and Acquiring*, is more distinctly a manual for clinicians, with added sections covering common traits and behaviors to identify with patients, along with strategies that have been used to attempt redress.

Psychologists currently recommend “cognitive-behavioral therapy,” a hands-on active learning method for dealing with possessions. Therapies for hoarders focus on:

- establishing strict patterns of physical practice (if foreseeable storage space is limited, ongoing acquisition must be exponentially limited in relation);
- improving problem-solving skills and pattern-recognition (broadening organizing and sorting categories);
- establishing psychological safeguards against overextending one’s emotional responsibilities with regard to objects.
The clinician generally visits the home of the patient during the hands-on therapeutic organizing project approach, but the clinician does not actually take part in the sorting and does not touch the patient’s possessions. From the hoarder’s perspective, with no functional inventory of materials there is the constant fear that something may be lost. Nothing can be moved or changed without fear of harm. In turn, nothing can be sorted or categorized. It is impossible to create a functional intellectual inventory because no summarizable order can be preserved or created physically. The effect is circular. The task of sorting grows, but simultaneously it becomes more difficult to identify categories, context, and relevance, or to allow others to touch or use (and even help sort) the possessions. “Most people with hoarding problems are extremely concerned about others discarding possessions without consulting them.”21 The collector alone holds the vague sense of the history and identity of each item, and he or she holds it by a tenuous, tangled thread so that he or she cannot allow others to assist with untangling. All items are retained awaiting a decision from the single master, and the single master is materially overwhelmed.

Without a sufficient ratio of archives staff to records creators, archivists can face a similar scenario. Archivists must provide responsible public access to incoming and backlogged materials. They must frequently do so with insufficient or untrained staff support. A cumulative state of disorganization in a large institution can be remarkably similar to that which a hoarder might cultivate, along with its circular burden of isolation.

According to Frost and Hartl, the “hoarder and the non-hoarder may judge the probability of future need for a possession the same, but the hoarder concludes that the possession should be saved.”22 Many hypotheses are offered to explain this. Most center around concepts of indecisiveness, perfectionism—“in particular the Concern Over Mistakes dimension of perfectionism”—or an habitual avoidance of “the decision required when discarding a possession,” and “the worry that a mistake had been made when something was discarded.”23 For this reason, therapy specifically includes techniques for dealing with perfectionism and the fear of making mistakes or failing to evaluate the changing value of a possession over time in a manner consistent with current experience, curbing a patient’s “all or nothing” and “catastrophizing” thoughts and helping pinpoint the specific detailed realities of a given fear. The patient is directed to ask things like “Would it really be awful? Would you never be able to recover if you made a mistake?” along with experiments in purposefully making actual mistakes or behaving mildly irresponsibly and measuring the organizational outcomes.24

Though the hoarding researchers had some difficulty in eliciting specific feared outcomes from the bulk of the subjects during hoarding studies, some of the individual observations may have a familiar ring to archivists:

- “The belief by the hoarder that the value of possessions changes over time. That is, although it may not be considered valuable at the present time, it may be so in a week or a month. Therefore, it is best not to throw anything away just in case it may be more valuable later.”25
- “Hoarders seen [sic] to have a heightened sense of responsibility for being prepared to meet a future need. Each possessions [sic] is seen as having functional utility under certain circumstances. Although those circumstances may not pertain at
present, they may in the future. It is as though they have a solution, but no problem on which to use it. If the solution is discarded and the problem occurs, ‘harm’ has been done. It is this ‘harm’ that the compulsive hoarder seeks to avoid. The exact nature and severity of this ‘harm’ is diffuse and unspecified.”

For archivists, fears about changing value and utility over time are very much apropos. As Frank Boles, editor of Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts, observes, “some archivists quake at the challenge of selection. They fear they will make a mistake. They fear that by their hand some irreparable damage will be done.”

Because the harm done by archivists in particular is professional, often public, and always close at hand, fear of archival mistakes may never be overcome. It might be interesting to play out “archival errors” in an academic setting as part of the archival professional education in appraisal with real-life examples of mistake-recovery. Such exercises in specificity might curtail some of the struggles and alleviate some of the unpleasant and cumulated professional and social stresses that arise during selection decisions. As Boles notes, “Archivists assume responsibility for selection not because by doing so they can select a perfect representation of society, but rather because selection is a social necessity.”

Looking Ahead

Even though hoarding tendencies and habits may be increasing in society at large, this is not to suggest that all hoards will reach the archives. Hoarding psychologists seek to help patients make sustainable lifetime collecting decisions without thoughts about the larger picture of history across generations. Not all hoards are eventually sorted. For example, though E-mails might be hoarded throughout a person’s career or some phase thereof, they may still be summarily dumped when the career or phase ends. As many archivists have seen, a friend, co-worker, or relative of the hoarder is often more inclined to “clear it all out” than to sort everything or to call in an archivist to survey a collection that is mostly trash.

There is also evidence of an undercurrent of social stigma or spectacle attached to openly disorganized—or even just obsessive acquisition of—physical goods. Indeed, this has been a theme in popular nonfiction concerning book collectors who became obsessed with collecting for the sake of collecting, for example, A Gentle Madness by Nicholas Basbanes and The Man Who Loved Books Too Much by Allison Hoover Bartlett. Similarly the recent television documentary series Hoarders consists entirely of house visits and interviews with people who have surrounded themselves with possessions to the point where their homes are in danger of being condemned. But one wonders whether such extreme examples can also have the opposite effect, encouraging complacency by shifting the perceived median toward outliers or encouraging a routine of hoarding and dumping to avoid the shame of exposure. Might such complacency or opposing fear of stigma eventually also appear in archival institutions as archivists and financial supporters contemplate unprocessed backlogs and deaccessioning strategies?

Hoarding is harmful to the collective historical record. Habits of unselective retention and unselective destruction both take their toll. Archivists, though not inherently
hoarders themselves, might be able to apply some of the broad psychological hypotheses on hoarding into hands-on sorting practice and exercises when working with records creators and collectors. Some knowledge of hoarding and hoarding therapies could bolster archivists’ ability to rally staff, volunteers, and even creators to sort those hoarded collections that must make it past the gates. Archivists might be able to tailor the way they present and define their collecting scope to researchers, students, support staff, volunteers, donors, or the general public. They might develop strategies that dissuade creators from hoarding and perhaps also protect archives from having to accession hoards. It would seem worthwhile to follow the studies of psychologists who seek insight into the processes of introducing, retrieving, and sustaining socially viable collecting habits in the population at large.

About the Author: Leah Broaddus is the university archivist at Southern Illinois University Carbondale’s Morris Library Special Collections Research Center. She is a graduate of the master’s of library science special collections program at Indiana University–Bloomington.

NOTES

1. Mark A. Greene, “What Were We Thinking?” Provenance 20 (2002): 35. Greene speaks about appraisal in the same manner that I speak of selection: that is, that it is a subjective and relative process subject to sometimes negatively enlightening exposure over time. Appraisal and selection decisions can both be called subjective, and often there is no distinction made between the two. The current article focuses on selection as the distinctive wild card in the process where hoarding is concerned, given that appraisal judgments of hoarders seem to be consistent with appropriate contextual communal ideas of value.


4. Ibid.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.


11. “Self Storage Industry Fact Sheet”


19. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 343.
28. Ibid.