Collecting Our Thoughts and Re-Collecting Our Stories: 
The Collection of Personal Records in Archival Institutions

by
Leah Sander

The appraisal of personal records is a challenging task for archivists, who must decide what records of a society are suitable for preserving in archival institutions. Much of the literature on archival appraisal has focused on records flowing from governments or institutions. What literature exists on the appraisal of personal records has often criticized the lack of any systematic approach to the task by personal records archivists. Some archivists have attacked what is understood as a "collecting mentality" in the appraisal of records, where records are acquired according to the eccentric tastes of archivists, who regard documents more as object-artifacts than as contextualized archival records. The practice of "collecting" records is perceived, in archival literature since the mid-twentieth century, as antithetical to the science of archival acquisition, where it implies a kind of impassioned, erratic, irrational pursuit of records as objects of desire.

This study demonstrates that the motives behind a collecting mentality are necessary for archivists to understand, however, since the forces driving some individuals to collect objects mirror those that inspire others to create and keep personal records. As such, the desire to control time, explore personal identity, create memory, develop life narratives and come to terms with human existence are all reasons why individuals both collect objects and create some types of personal records. If archivists understand these impulses, they will be better able to understand the values and functions of personal record keeping, which will in turn assist them in making better appraisal decisions.

Chapter One will examine the psychology of collecting to establish what human needs are fulfilled in the collection of objects. The themes discussed will then be extended to the creation of personal records, where it will be illustrated that the same human needs are fulfilled through the collection of thoughts and stories as through the collection of objects. Chapter Two will review existing literature on the subject of archival appraisal, in particular highlighting how archivists have understood "collecting" to be related to the acquisition of records. Chapter Three focuses on the results of a case study of women's records at the University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections and the Archives of Manitoba, which demonstrate how the themes at work collecting objects have driven the creation of these personal records. It will be concluded, therefore, that the collecting mentality is one that archivists should understand, rather than dismiss, for it reveals some of the value and deeper functions of personal record keeping.