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THE ETHICS OF PROCESSING

Virginia J. H. Cain

Carrying out the archival functions of arrangement and description, those activities usually broadly associated with processing, logically comes after the acquisition of papers or records but before reference services and researcher access are provided for these materials. Surely many archives have in their deed of gift or instrument of transfer form a statement similar to this:

...this institution will provide a suitable repository for the materials and will house and maintain the same in good order according to accepted archival principles and procedures to ensure both preservation and accessibility to researchers...

...the materials will be available to all qualified researchers on terms of equal access. Any restrictions on access requested for reasons of privacy or confidentiality must be noted specifically

in this agreement and must have a date of termination....

Therefore, once papers or records are acquired, an archivist has obligated herself to arrange and describe them in a professional manner and to make them available as far as possible without restriction.

There are a number of sections and phrases in the Society of American Archivists's 1992 "Code of Ethics for Archivists" which can help explain issues and try to answer questions related to ethical issues in arrangement and description.¹ These are among the many professional considerations which must weigh into the way in which an archivist administers both processing and an overall archival program.

¹ A Society of American Archivists Ethics Task Force, appointed in 1988, revised the 1980 "Code of Ethics," and it is this new code, adopted by the SAA Council in 1992, and its commentary which this article addresses. A published draft of what would become the 1992 "Code of Ethics for Archivists and Commentary" may be found in the *SAA Newsletter*, July 1991. In his introduction to this published draft, Society of American Archivists Ethics Task Force Chair Maynard Brichford provides a brief overview of SAA's consideration of professional ethics. Additional discussion and background information may be found in "Ethics for Archivists: The SAA's Code and Commentary—A Special Edition with Introduction" written and made available through the Society of American Archivists for classes, study, and discussion by former Committee on Ethics Chair David E. Horn.

While a careful reading of the code of ethics will suggest that every section can relate to arrangement and description in some way, it is interesting to note that even the 1990 manual, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*,² does not devote a section to ethics. Much ethical behavior—or at least knowledge of ethics—is possibly presumed at a certain point, and certain aspects of applying ethics are—like certain aspects of processing itself—possibly considered to be common sense, albeit controlled and orderly common sense. This article will consider those sections of the code which have a more specific relation to processing and will also consider situations in which these portions of the code may affect the practical pursuit of processing.

In the opening sections of the code commentary, Sections I, "The Purpose of a Code of Ethics," and II, "Introduction to the Code," reference is made to selecting, preserving, and making available records and papers that have lasting value. While not specifically stated, arrangement and description can be understood to be included in this broad description of the principal functions of archivists, perhaps most specifically in the area broadly defined as making archival materials available.

In addition, these sections warn of the frequency with which ethical decisions will be faced; "[presume] that archivists obey the laws...[and] act in accord with sound

² Frederic M. Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*. Archival Fundamentals Series (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990).

archival principles"; remind practicing archivists that "they subscribe to a code of ethics based on sound archival principles and promote institutional and professional observance of these ethical and archival standards"; and establish an expectation of "the highest standards of professional conduct and excellent work in every area of archives administration."³ New members of the profession, practicing archivists, and donors or others who have some contact with archives and archivists can and should expect that, in meeting certain moral and legal responsibilities, high professional and ethical standards will be upheld.

Section III, "Collecting Policies," also makes reference to processing in its final sentence: "[Archivists] cooperate to ensure the preservation of materials in repositories where they will be adequately processed and effectively utilized." The commentary for this section does not address preservation and processing specifically but rather dwells on collecting policies, cooperation, and competition.

This section serves as a reminder of two important things, however. First, while there are separate, specific standards and ethical considerations in professional preservation work, the basic survival of materials through protection, maintenance, and responsible custody is an important reason for collecting in the first place. The handling and housing of materials in arrangement and

³ Quotations are taken from "Code of Ethics for Archivists" and "Code of Ethics for Archivists and Commentary," adopted by the Council of the Society of American Archivists (Chicago: 1992).

description, even when specific, detailed preservation work is not undertaken, can either promote or hinder further survival once the material is safely in a repository.

Second, implicit in this section of the code is the suggestion that a repository should only seek to acquire materials for which it can indeed provide adequate processing. This suggests resources for staff and supplies, staff—paid or volunteer—with both time and training to do processing work, and space in which to work on and to house materials. The commentary for this section mentions that casting aspersions upon the practices or capabilities of other repositories or other archivists is unprofessional. While archivists may have opinions—sometimes seemingly substantiated by comments from donors or researchers—about the administrative and processing capabilities of other repositories, these opinions may not be used as tools in seeking or competing for collections. This is also a reminder that a repository should be keeping its own processing house in order; in part, the reputation of a repository and its ability to attract donors and serve researchers rests on its abilities to handle the materials in its care. This does not imply that a repository with a backlog is a “bad repository”—or worse, an unethical one—or that an archivist should somehow be able to process materials fully the moment they arrive. A repository with a processing backlog is not the same as a repository which collects materials with no intention of or no resources to process the materials and make them available. Indeed, if materials are important enough to acquire, they are important enough to process, though processing order and

priority will be determined and adjusted by balancing a number of important factors considered within the individual repository.

Archival ethics obligate archivists to maintain a sound arrangement and description program, to train staff to process to an acceptable level, to stay current with professional developments, to adhere to national standards, to set standards and establish procedures for processing, to dedicate time to work on processing, and to work steadily to see that materials already owned or newly received by a repository are arranged and described in accordance with accepted archival principles and practices. In this as in other areas, "institutional policies should assist archivists in their efforts to conduct themselves according to this code. Indeed, institutions, with the assistance of their archivists, should deliberately adopt policies that comply with principles of the code."

Section IV, "Relations with Donors, and Restrictions," states that archivists negotiating for papers seek fair decisions based on full consideration of many factors including plans for processing, and also states that archivists discourage unreasonable restrictions on access or use but may accept clearly stated restrictions of limited duration, may on occasion suggest restrictions to protect privacy, and must observe faithfully all agreements made at the time of transfer or acquisition. This again speaks to an institution's obligation to process the papers it acquires and ties processing capacity and capability directly into acquisitions decisions.

For example, how can a public library with no trained archival staff plan to process and make available a huge collection of congressional papers? How can a repository staff plan to process a large collection of badly disarranged papers to a usable level with no staff professionally trained to identify and reconstruct original order? And, how can a repository, even though it may be able to assist in the immediate protection of an important collection, plan to process that collection if it contains films and wire recordings when it owns no equipment on which to play the recordings, or view the films for purposes of identification and description, and for which it cannot afford duplication for security, preservation, or access?

Processing work should always begin with consideration of the principles of provenance and original order. Processing should always be done with impartiality. For instance, arrangement and description should not be tailored to the wishes of a single researcher, who might wish to find all correspondence of a single individual or all speeches on a particular topic located together. If a collection contains a large run of chronologically arranged correspondence on a wide variety of topics, the archivist will not rearrange the papers to suit a researcher who may wish to read only letters on certain topics or exchanged with certain individuals. Instead, the archivist seeks other tools, such as selective name and content indexing, to provide intellectual access and linkages in a way that the physical arrangement of the papers cannot. An archivist should also consider whether it is possible that, in employing a sophisticated subject specialist to process certain

collections, this specialist processor will become too involved in the subject to process quickly and impartially or that he or she will arrange and describe a collection in a highly specialized and potentially distorted way.

The question of restrictions in relation to processing is raised in this section of the code, as well. While the processor may not always be the same individual who negotiates a transfer or an acquisition, processors can hope for reasonable restrictions and offer opinions in the matter of restrictions, especially about the difficulty a certain restriction will pose for arrangement, description, and access. Once a group of papers is acquired, the processor should become fully familiar with all terms of acquisition so that processing plans will not be in conflict with a restriction or other portion of the donor agreement.

Consider a deed of gift in which a donor has specified that all the correspondence between herself and another individual is to be completely closed for a period of twenty years. These letters, which are relatively few in number, are interfiled throughout ten linear feet of general correspondence. With no other restriction in effect, it would be a disservice to potential researchers to close this series or the entire collection for the twenty-year period. In such a case, the archivist could, as he processes the papers, separate all the correspondence covered by the restriction, leave withdrawal sheets in place of the removed items, and house the restricted materials separately in a way that will prevent their accidentally being served to a researcher.

It is always possible that a restricted item will escape a processor's attention. A processing plan with such specific

provisions for the removal of restricted materials should also include at least one additional safeguard to ensure that the terms of the original donor or transfer agreement are faithfully observed. Such safeguards may include a review by a second staff member at the time of processing or prior to their first use by a researcher. These steps are time-consuming and labor intensive, and they assume a staff of more than one person, but they might be necessary if such restrictions have previously been accepted.

Section IV of the code also mentions restrictions suggested by the archivist. While the code is certainly not advocating that archivists seek or promote restrictions, this portion of the code could also relate to processing. In arranging and describing papers, an archivist will look more closely at the papers than will any other staff member, than will many researchers, and indeed than may have the donor or agent of transfer himself. What if the archivist finds in a collection of personal papers correspondence containing damaging information about living persons? What if the information concerns a deceased person whose descendants are very prominent in the community? What if a group of records includes applications for financial assistance that reveal useful demographic and sociological information but also give names and personal and financial details about persons who are presumably still living? Protection of the privacy of living persons, especially those who had no voice in the placement of the papers or records in an archives, is a very real concern and steps must be taken to protect this privacy.

There is no single, simple course to follow—the repository could impose its own restrictions, could renegotiate with the donor, or could do a combination of the two and approach the donor with specific recommendations for handling the situation. An archivist must be careful not to be so extreme in such measures that his efforts could be interpreted as over-sensitivity at best, and as sanitizing or censoring collections at worst. If materials are separated from the collection, criteria for these decisions must be determined carefully, documented thoroughly, and applied consistently. Withdrawal sheets could hold the place of the removed items, or narrative notes in the description could account for the separated material.

Section V of the code is entitled "Description." This section is completely new to the 1992 code—the former code did not address description so directly. The finding aid, mentioned prominently in the text of the code, is the basic product of description and is at the heart of both archival processing and reference service.

Processing actually begins with the decision to acquire a specific collection, and continues with the decision to process the collection to a certain level and to create all the needed parts of the finding aid from which description and access points are derived in order to facilitate access to the collection. Reference, on the other hand, begins with an inquiry which leads to a search of access tools and the identification of specific finding aids to use as gateways into specific collections to find the needed information. In both cases, the finding aid plays a key role in linking the

intellectual needs of researchers to the physical location of information in collections.

Section V states that "archivists establish intellectual control over their holdings by describing them in finding aids and guides to facilitate internal controls and access by users of the archives." The commentary goes on to explain clearly that "description is a primary responsibility and the appropriate level of intellectual control should be established over all archival holdings. A general descriptive inventory should be prepared when the records are accessioned. Detailed processing can be time-consuming and should be completed according to a priority based on the significance of the material, user demand and the availability of staff time. It is not sufficient for archivists to hold and preserve materials; they also facilitate the use of their collections and make them known. Finding aids, repository guides, and reports in appropriate publications permit and encourage users in the institution and outside researchers."

This commentary says a lot about description in a very few words—description, however time-consuming, is a vital link in the archival continuum from acquisition to reference and research. Finding aids and subject guides used internally facilitate use of the collections by researchers who have come to the repository. Notices in journals and in national guides used by subject specialists, entries in the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, records in national databases such as OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) and RLIN (Research Libraries Information Network), and the availability of full-text finding aids through the Internet bring holdings to the attention of researchers

who have not yet visited and who may never actually visit the repository. Archivists are indeed obligated both practically and ethically to make their holdings accessible and to promote the use of the holdings of their repository.

The code and its commentary, however, do not reach a level of detail that would allow it to address some other practical issues surrounding description which cannot be overlooked in a consideration of processing and ethics. In description, an archivist is obliged to be impartial, accurate, and complete. An archivist should follow the standards of the profession and keep abreast of changes in the area of description as in other areas. Leaving the writing of laudatory biographies or even steamy sagas or exposes to others, an archivist does not draw conclusions for researchers, and must be impartial, accurate, and complete in recording information about collections.

Section VI, "Appraisal, Protection, and Arrangement," also contains parts relevant to processing. It seems that the code puts the archival cart before the archival horse, treating description before appraisal, responsible custody, and arrangement. This unit, whatever its placement, is important.

The section charges archivists with preserving the arrangement of documents in the repository, protecting the integrity of records and papers in their custody, providing for the physical safety of the materials, and ensuring that evidential value inherent in records and papers is not impaired through archival work including arrangement and description. Each charge clearly relates to processing and alludes to the importance of arranging and managing

papers and records in a careful and professional way that will not jeopardize original order or evidence inherent in pre-existing arrangement. Description can also be a key to protecting arrangement and integrity and to security, for the descriptive records made beginning at the time of acquisition will document when the materials were acquired, what materials actually form the acquisition, what related materials are located in other parts of the same collection and in other collections, and in what order the materials have been or should be arranged in case they are disarranged during transfer or use.

Section VII, "Privacy and Privileged Information," addresses an issue that is crucial in archival ethics. In addition to the previously mentioned concerns about establishing and respecting reasonable restrictions in order to protect the privacy of living persons, this section speaks to the fact that archivists have access to this restricted information and to other confidential information, and that archivists must guard such information carefully. Not only would it be unethical to reveal or to profit from such information, the code states, but it would also be a blow to the integrity of the repository and of the profession to violate the safeguarding responsibilities with which archivists are charged.

Respect for restricted and confidential information is a vital ethical value to instill in archival staff from the earliest moment of their employment. This applies to staff at all levels from student workers to experienced professional archivists. Think how easy it can be to marvel at confidential facts over a cup of coffee in the staff lounge or

to reveal personal information in cocktail party conversation, and think of the damage this can do. Safeguarding confidential information is a concrete value of the archival profession that might provide a good place to start in conveying the concept of archival ethics in on-the-job training.

In Section VIII, "Use and Restrictions," processing interacts closely with reference service. Carefully documented acquisition, accurate arrangement, and thorough description will make reference service easier, especially in a repository in which some staff spend more time on processing while others spend more time on reference. Any staff member involved in reference must have clear information about the status of a collection, and must not be expected to remember which portions of which collections are governed by which restrictions and for how long. Similarly, archivists must not seem to be keeping information from researchers, whether intentionally or not.

Description can again be the key in both cases. Descriptions should account for all materials, whether restricted or not, and as far as possible, should note related materials elsewhere in a large collection or in another collection. A withdrawal form can hold the place of items withdrawn from a collection or group of records for restriction. This informs a researcher of what is in the collection but not available. It can help a researcher avoid drawing incorrect conclusions and assuming that certain documents never existed or once existed but are now lost. As important is that it can reassure the researcher that the

repository is not capriciously restricting information and is not hiding information.

In addition, a collection description should contain a clear statement about restrictions on access, quotation, or reproduction either on its cover page or in its introduction or other narrative sections. While it would be impossible and impractical to provide complete details about restrictions in a single section of a single page, a brief statement on a cover page, for example, does provide information about restrictions that can be conveyed to remind reference staff and to inform researchers. Information about restrictions should also be included in online records and in finding aids available on the Internet.

A final section of the code that can apply to processing is Section X, "Research by Archivists," which describes ethical conduct for archivists who are using their own holdings for research and for archivists who collect manuscripts. The commentary for this section recognizes a conflict that exists: on one hand, the archivist doing research in the holdings of her employing institution may be reluctant to make these materials available or to share information about the holdings with other researchers working in the same area; on the other hand, the archivist may be the person best qualified to do research in areas represented in institutional holdings. The commentary suggests that the best resolution is to clarify and publicize the role of the archivist as researcher.

In this, as in other areas of the code, there are no specific means for answering questions and solving problems related to ethics. The code of ethics gives

guidelines, not procedure. The code is, in other words, *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. It provides the basis for that controlled common sense mentioned at the outset.

In addition, the code recommends no specific enforcement mechanism, but enforcement and discipline were not intended to be derived directly from this code.⁴ Section XI does admonish archivists to "avoid irresponsible criticism of other archivists or institutions and [to] address complaints about professional or ethical conduct to the individuals or institutions concerned, or to a professional archival organization." The role for national or regional archival organizations, their officers, committees, or task forces in promoting ethical practice remains to be defined, practiced, tested, and refined.

Proactivity in the use of the code's ethical guidelines remains an important responsibility of the individual archivist. The code sets expectations which the archivist can use in developing sound institutional policies, making informed decisions, and applying professional judgment in arrangement and description as well as in other archival operations. It will remain a professional and personal challenge to the archivist to factor the general guidelines of

⁴ Luciana Duranti, "Enforcing the SAA Code of Ethics." *Archival Outlook: The Newsletter of the Society of American Archivists*, July 1993, p. 7.

the code into the specific situations which arise in daily practice.

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