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Investigating the "small world" of literary archival collections: the impact of EAC-CPF on archival descriptive practices – Part 1: Relationships, description and the archival community

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Introduction

"It's a small world" is an adage with which custodians of personal papers and corporate body records are familiar. Archival records can reveal the interconnectivity of human activity in art, work, and leisure. The recently released standard, Encoded Archival Context—Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families (EAC-CPF), is designed to leverage this interconnectivity through the use of XML technologies to enhance a core component of archival description while advancing data handling and reconfiguration.[1]

EAC-CPF provides a framework for the identification and description of entities documented by materials in archival repositories, including the delineation of relationships with other entities, resources, and functions. While identification and description have long been a component of archival description, the explicit portrayal of relationships is a new development. Contemporaneous with the linked open data movement, EAC-CPF presents new challenges for the descriptive paradigms of the archival profession.

The assumptions about interconnectivity of entities warrant attention due to the impact relationships will have on existing descriptive practices. To tackle this problem, it will be necessary to determine if the connections documented in our existing descriptive output are meaningful, and whether some connections that are left out would be useful to integrate into an EAC-CPF environment. The "Small World" project, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, investigated the degree to which interconnections can be understood and leveraged with a standard such as EAC-CPF and existing metadata.[2]

In order to investigate the connections between corporate bodies and persons, the Small World project sought to investigate the "small world" phenomenon of archival collections representing American literary figures to determine the scope of interconnectivity reflected in archival description. The project focused on manuscript collections for American literary figures held by four repositories: Stanford University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas–Austin, and Houghton Library at Harvard University. In total, 167 figures were examined.

The goal of this research is to provide recommendations that allow the archival descriptive community to appropriately leverage descriptive data for use in multiple

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[1] http://eac.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/.

[2] http://gslis.simmons.edu/smallworld/. This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, RE-04-11-0078.

environments and to enhance the access and use of archival materials. As a standard, EAC-CPF highlights the possibilities of connections in ways that have only been alluded to in the past. Before making recommendations for the descriptive community, it is necessary to understand the underlying relationship structures that emerge among entities, preconceived notions about those relationships, and the extent to which relationships have been tacitly expressed in archival description.

There are several areas to explore in understanding relationships as a component of archival description. What relationship types are considered crucial? What about the strength of relationships: do relationships that are fleeting have the same imperative for description as long-standing relationships, and are there metrics that will allow archivists to make an assessment of the strength of a relationship between two entities? Are all relationships bidirectional? If so, does each direction warrant description? These are just a few of the issues surrounding the explicit identification and description of relationships.

This initial article defines the context of the project and explores the problem of relationships in the context of archival description and the descriptive community. The results of a survey distributed in March 2013 are presented to illuminate the attitudes of the descriptive community regarding relationships. A second article in this series will present information on social network analysis and provide a view of the various relationship structures found in existing archival description compared to that found in external biographical resources. Also included in the second article is a discussion of vocabularies for relationships discovered in the data analysis process. The development of relationship vocabularies is ongoing in the archival and linked data communities, and the experiences of this project will contribute to those efforts. A final article will provide recommendations for the descriptive community regarding the production of archival description in the future that maximizes the ability to leverage data in multiple environments, illustrated by efforts such as the Social Network and Archival Context project (SNAC).[3]

Literature review.

Archival description lies at the heart of the archival endeavor; it is one of the core activities engaged in by archivists across all repository types and formats. Historical analyses of archival description work indicate that there were divergent traditions at the root of archival description.[4] Historical manuscript traditions, European public archives, professionalization, and integration with the library community all played a part in the development of current approaches to description. Luciana Duranti concludes, "It appears that the historical evolution of the concept of description is directly linked to two elements: (1) the relationship between archival material and its creator, and (2) the type

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[3] http://socialarchive.iath.virginia.edu/.

[4] Davis, "Descriptive Standards and the Archival Profession"; Duranti, "Origin and Development of the Concept of Archival Description."

of user of archival material."[5] Advancements in technology united these traditions and stimulated an examination of archival standards.[6]

Recent analysis of archival description has employed a theoretical approach to critically examine underlying principles. From genre theory to rhetorical genre theory, textual criticism, and postmodernist approaches, the social construction of archival description is a theme that permeates these approaches.[7] Ideally, "the archivist's role in relation to records is to reveal their meaning and significance—not to participate in the construction of meanings—through the exercise of intellectual control." The archival intervention, "including arrangement and description, is at once insulated from the processes of records creation and from broader societal processes."[8] In that context, the emphasis is on the decisions that are made in the construction of the description. This theme is an important one in considering relationships as well. The promises of the linked data movement indicate that it is possible to create links automatically throughout all the information available with the establishment of persistent identifiers. The linked data movement has yet to address the constructive aspect of information resources. This aspect will need to reconcile the recognition that archival description is the result of an active engagement with "the archivist's own understanding at the center of the discussion and considering not just what information one needs to interpret and represent the records effectively, but, more specifically, how one uses the information on hand to arrive at an understanding of the context(s) of the records and to support the decision making involved in arranging and describing them."[9]

Methodology.

Given that relationships and their description are a central facet in the new paradigm for archival description, it is necessary to understand the nature of relationships and the archival community's previous (often unspoken) understanding of them as a part of descriptive work. These problems can be explored in two ways: (1) through an analysis of relationship structures included in existing archival descriptions that are often implicitly included through narrative text, and (2) through an investigation of archivist perspectives on relationships. The research included here addresses the latter; a following paper will examine the former. A survey was conducted in March 2013 to gain an understanding of archivist perspectives so that recommendations can be made within that context. The questionnaire presented the concept of relations between entities and gauged the perception of relationship types from the descriptive community. The survey was designed to measure the general impressions of relationships as a component of archival description, to present scenarios in which participants could indicate their inclination to establish a relationship, and to explore the variables that could impact the nature of

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[5] Ibid., 52.

[6] Szary, "Archival Description Standards."

[7] Trace and Dillon, "The Evolution of the Finding Aid in the United States"; Meehan, "Making the Leap from Parts to Whole"; MacNeil, "Picking Our Text"; MacNeil, "What Finding Aids *Do*"; Yakel, "Archival Representation."

[8] Duff and Harris, "Stories and Names," 264.

[9] Meehan, "Making the Leap from Parts to Whole," 73.

relationships (see the survey in the addendum). The survey was distributed over three email lists (Archives and Archivists, EAD, and Archival Educators Roundtable) and remained open for about two weeks. Descriptive statistics were gathered to illustrate general trends in perceptions about relationships.

Results and discussion.

The survey results indicate that the archival community has only just begun to consider relationships in the context of archival description and the role that explicit description of those relationships may play. There were 208 respondents to the survey documenting the full range of archival demography. Participants' professional experience ranged from less than one year to more than twenty-five years. Participants worked at a wide array of repository types, including historical societies, libraries, museums, religious archives, governmental repositories, foundations, and medical institutions. A full two-thirds identified with traditional history and research oriented environments. When asked what sort of work participants engaged in, nearly 90 percent included arrangement and description—along with other tasks such as appraisal, reference services and outreach, advocacy, and promotion. Some questions in the survey did not elicit full participation by the respondents. The scenario-based questions elicited a nearly two-thirds response rate. Other questions, particularly those where respondents were asked to rate agreement on a statement along a Likert scale, returned more participation. This may be due to some confusion over the nature of the scenario-driven questions or a reluctance to weigh in on something that represents relatively new thinking in the archival descriptive community.

Following the demographic questions, two questions were asked to glean participant perspectives on establishing connections as a component of description. Participants were asked about their agreement on a five-point Likert scale of "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," with a neutral value of "neither agree nor disagree." The first question aimed to test attitudes toward contextual information as a component of archival description. Responding to the statement "Contextual information is an important component of archival description and should always be included," 96 percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. Recognizing that contextual information is a significant component of archival description is only the first step, however. The second general statement generated less agreement: "The role of the archivist is to provide objective description to enhance access to materials. Archivists should leave the interpretation to researchers." Only 76 percent of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed (the responses were evenly split between the two). More significantly, almost 15 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed, and another 10 percent could neither agree nor disagree. These results indicate some disagreement about the *role* of archival description in terms of access and use of archival materials. When these two questions are considered together, it can be deduced that contextual information is important in archival description but archival description itself has some aspects that are up for debate.

The next two questions constituted a set of scenarios and asked survey participants to rate the significance of a relationship between two entities. In addition to rating the value or significance of the description of a relationship, respondents were asked to consider that

relationship first outside of the context of a collection and, second, when that same relationship is documented within the collection. The design of this set of thirteen questions had two objectives: to investigate perspectives on various relationship types (such as familial, ancestral, social, etc.) and to ask indirectly about the significance of the collection in determining the significance of a relationship. Surprisingly, the presence of documentation of the relationship in the collection had only a minor impact on the significance of the relationship in these scenarios (see table 1).

	Very significant	Significant	Neither significant nor insignificant	Insignificant	Very insignificant	Cannot determine
Outside of a collection (n = 1,719)	444 (25.8%)	735 (42.8%)	262 (15.2%)	104 (6.1%)	52 (3.0%)	122 (7.1%)
Documented in the collection (n = 1,711)	535 (31.3%)	680 (39.7%)	271 (15.8%)	105 (6.1%)	38 (2.2%)	82 (4.8%)

Table 1 provides an overall view of the scenario-ranking portion of the survey. A few results stand out as anticipated statistics. For instance, the inability to determine whether or not a relationship is significant outside of the context of a collection is higher than those documented in the collection. It is surprising, however, given other portions of the survey, that this difference is not greater. Perhaps it can be attributed to the fact that specific relationship types were provided in the scenarios, and when asked about specific relationship types, participants were more likely to make a judgment in contrast to the more generic question discussed below. Comments associated with the second set of scenarios (the same scenarios with the added information about its importance to the collection) indicate that some of the survey participants may not have understood the distinction made in the survey design. This could account for some of the lack of distinction between the two scenario sets.

Despite the caveats in the data gathering, when considered together, the insignificant and very insignificant categories only differ 0.9 percent (9.1% for outside of a collection and 8.3% for documented in the collection) between the two variables, indicating that the collection itself is not a determining factor for an insignificance rating of specific relationship types. Similarly, there is a negligible difference (0.6%) in the neither significant nor insignificant categories, although the difference favors those relationships documented in the collection rather than outside of a collection. This trend continues when comparing the very significant category. There is a 5.5 percent increase between the two variables, with the "documented in the collection" category prevailing. In the significant category, however, the reverse is true: those relationships considered outside of a collection were 3.1 percent more often rated significant than those documented in the collection. This may be due to individual participant perspective on the difference between "very significant" and "significant," although that seems to have been less of an issue on the other end of the scale.

The scenarios that cover relationships between persons on the whole are considered to be significant. Two scenarios were familial in nature (see table 2). The direct relative appears to garner more agreement and hold more significance to survey participants than the ancestry question. The ancestry question is interesting, as the wording indicates that the entity being described (A) has a descendant (B) rather than the other way around. This reversal of terminology demonstrates how easy it is to invert information about relationships.

Table 2. Familial scenarios

	Very significant	**Moderately significant**	**Neither significant nor insignificant**	**Moderately insignificant**	**Very insignificant**	**Cannot be determined**
Entity A is a direct relative (i.e., mother, father, child, sibling) of Entity B						
Without collection (n = 133)	63 (47.4%)	50 (37.6%)	6 (4.5%)	5 (3.8%)	1 (0.8%)	8 (6.0%)
Documented in collection (n = 132)	99 (75.0%)	29 (22.0%)	2 (1.5%)	1 (0.8%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.8%)
Entity A (historically significant) is an ancestor of Entity B						
Without collection (n = 133)	25 (18.8%)	57 (42.9%)	22 (16.5%)	16 (12.0%)	4 (3.0%)	9 (6.8%)
Documented in collection (n = 132)	27 (20.5%)	54 (40.9%)	24 (18.2%)	16 (12.1%)	6 (4.5%)	5 (3.8%)

Many of the person-to-person scenarios suggested had very low numbers in the insignificant categories (see table 3). Some of the results are unexpected, though. For example, in the "studied with" scenario, when the relationship is not documented in the collection, the significant end of the spectrum accounts for just over 70 percent; when the relationship is documented in the collection, that falls slightly to just over 65 percent. The other end of the spectrum, including the neither significant nor insignificant, however, reflects a greater change (almost 23% and almost 32%, respectively). The difference is accounted for in the "cannot be determined" category, which is 4 percent larger when considered outside of a collection than those documented in a collection. In contrast, in the "friend" relationship, the significance rating increases from under 50 to over 80 percent between the two scenarios. Again, the difference within the "cannot be determined" category is also substantial (6.9%).

Table 3. Relationships between persons

	Very significant	**Moderately significant**	**Neither significant nor insignificant**	**Moderately insignificant**	**Very insignificant**	**Cannot be determined**

Entity A collaborated with Entity B						
Without collection (n = 133)	57 (42.9%)	49 (36.8%)	16 (12.0%)	4 (3.0%)	1 (0.8%)	6 (4.5%)
Documented in collection (n = 132)	90 (68.2%)	33 (25.0%)	8 (6.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.8%)
Entity A studied with Entity B (historically significant)						
Without collection (n = 132)	34 (25.8%)	59 (44.7%)	16 (12.1%)	8 (6.1%)	6 (4.5%)	9 (6.8%)
Documented in collection (n = 132)	21 (15.9%)	66 (50.0%)	24 (18.2%)	15 (11.4%)	3 (2.3%)	3 (2.8%)
Entity A was a friend of Entity B						
Without collection (n = 131)	17 (13.0%)	45 (34.4%)	37 (28.2%)	13 (9.9%)	6 (4.6%)	13 (9.9%)
Documented in collection (n = 132)	60 (45.5%)	48 (36.4%)	16 (12.1%)	1 (0.8%)	3 (2.3%)	4 (3.0%)
Entity A was influenced by Entity B						
Without collection (n = 132)	31 (23.5%)	40 (30.3%)	31 (23.5%)	9 (6.8%)	5 (3.8%)	16 (12.1%)
Documented in collection (n = 132)	33 (25.0%)	47 (35.6%)	23 (17.4%)	12 (9.1%)	2 (1.5%)	15 (11.4%)

The relationship between persons and corporate bodies appears to garner less agreement among the survey participants (see table 4). While still leaning toward significant over insignificant, the spread across the significance scale is more evenly distributed. The scenarios that ask about an entity being active in an organization or an entity working for an institution present the greatest similarities when considering the presence or absence of the relationship in the collection. In both categories, whether documented in the collection or not, 80 percent or more of the survey respondents considered the relationships significant or very significant. Other person-to–corporate body relationships present results similar to the person to person disagreements in significance among respondents.

Table 4. Relationships between persons and corporate bodies

	Very significant	Moderately significant	Neither significant nor insignificant	Moderately insignificant	Very insignificant	Cannot be determined
Entity A received a degree from Institution B						
Without collection (n = 133)	30 (22.6%)	63 (47.4%)	21 (15.8%)	8 (6.0%)	3 (2.3%)	8 (6.0%)
Documented in collection	16 (12.1%)	55 (41.7%)	38 (28.8%)	13 (9.8%)	9 (6.8%)	1 (0.8%)

(n = 132)						
Entity A was active in Organization B						
Without collection (n = 133)	42 (31.6%)	67 (50.4%)	13 (9.8%)	2 (1.5%)	3 (2.3%)	6 (4.5%)
Documented in collection (n = 132)	50 (37.9%)	64 (48.5%)	13 (9.8%)	2 (1.5%)	1 (0.8%)	2 (1.5%)
Entity A was a member of Armed Forces B						
Without collection (n = 132)	26 (19.7%)	69 (52.3%)	20 (15.2%)	6 (4.5%)	3 (2.3%)	8 (6.1%)
Documented in collection (n = 132)	27 (20.5%)	59 (44.7%)	28 (21.2%)	8 (6.1%)	1 (0.8%)	9 (6.8%)
Entity A was a patient at Institution B						
Without collection (n = 131)	11 (8.4%)	52 (39.7%)	28 (21.4%)	14 (10.7%)	10 (7.6%)	16 (12.2%)
Documented in collection (n = 131)	15 (11.5%)	47 (35.9%)	31 (23.7%)	16 (12.2%)	6 (4.6%)	16 (12.2%)
Entity A worked for Institution B						
Without collection (n = 132)	56 (42.4%)	54 (40.9%)	11 (8.3%)	3 (2.3%)	2 (1.5%)	6 (4.5%)
Documented in collection (n = 130)	46 (35.4%)	58 (44.6%)	11 (8.5%)	7 (5.4%)	1 (0.8%)	7 (5.4%)

The role of a biographer and the relationship between the biographer and his or her subject was also spread across the significance scale (see table 5). In general, the relationship was considered to be significant (75% very significant and moderately significant). Just over 5 percent could not determine whether the relationship was significant or not. Speculation could be made that the biographer relationship is not always bidirectional. For example, David McCullough certainly has a relationship with John Adams, yet it is hard to argue that Adams would likewise have a relationship with McCullough. This is just one of a handful of relationship types which illustrate issues with directionality that should be resolved.

Table 5. The biography relationships

	Very significant	Moderately significant	Neither significant nor insignificant	Moderately insignificant	Very insignificant	Cannot be determined
Entity A is the biographer of Entity B						
Without collection (n = 132)	32 (24.2%)	67 (50.8%)	13 (9.8%)	10 (7.6%)	3 (2.3%)	7 (5.3%)
Documented in collection	31 (23.9%)	59 (45.4%)	24 (18.5%)	5 (3.9%)	2 (1.5%)	9 (6.9%)

(n = 130)						

A final scenario to be considered is the recipient of awards and how to express the relationship between a person and an award (see table 6). Despite these potential difficulties the assessment of the significance of the relationship was nearly the same across the collection variable. Just over 60 percent of respondents felt the relationship was significant, around 30 percent felt it was less significant and under ten percent could not determine.

Table 6. Awards

	Very significant	**Moderately significant**	**Neither significant nor insignificant**	**Moderately insignificant**	**Very insignificant**	**Cannot be determined**
Entity A received Award B						
Without collection (n = 132)	20 (15.2%)	63 (47.7%)	28 (21.2%)	6 (4.5%)	5 (3.8%)	10 (7.8%)
Documented in collection (n = 132)	20 (15.2%)	61 (46.2%)	29 (22.0%)	9 (6.8%)	4 (3.0%)	9 (6.8%)

Of the total number of participants answering each of the scenario questions about those relationships outside of the context of the collection materials (1,719), 7.1 percent could not determine the significance. Conversely, 92.9 percent indicated some measure of significance about the relationship. When considered in the context of collection materials, the number of "cannot determine" decreases to 4.8 percent, leaving 95.2 percent able to determine the significance, even if it is a neutral determination (see table 1). This is reinforced by the comments attached to the scenarios. Participants were asked to provide insight into why the significance of the relationship could not be determined. Of the comments provided, "it depends" is expressed in a variety of ways.

Three specific relationship scenarios were discussed in comments: Entity A was a patient at Institution B; Entity A received Award B; and Entity A was influenced by Entity B. The patient scenario, for instance, provoked comments seeking additional information before respondents could make a determination including factors such as the length of stay, nature of the facility, impact on the entity, type of treatment, and so on. Similarly, the type of award was a variable that impacted the significance ranking. The concept of influence, however, proved the most problematic. Comments such as "influence is a squishy sort of relationship" and "I think it would often be very difficult to prove that Entity A was influenced by Entity B" indicate a notion of intangibility. One participant commented regarding influence that "interpretation and opinion [are] required to determine this relationship." Without more to rely on, it is unclear whether or not the participant endorses the use of interpretation and opinion to make the assessment or is saying that this type of relationship is out of the bounds of archival description.

Following the scenarios, three further questions were posed regarding the nature of relationships rather than specific relationship types. The first question asked about the explicit significance of the use of the collection to judge the relationship's significance (see table 7). While the answer to this question was skewed to the agree side, there were over 10 percent who either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Additionally, fewer strongly agreed than agreed, and the neutral position of neither agree nor disagree also constituted over 10 percent.

Table 7. Questions about the nature of relationships
(n = 133)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The importance of the relationship should be judged based on the materials within the collection	49 (36.8%)	53 (39.8%)	15 (11.3%)	11 (8.3%)	5 (3.8%)

The next question asked about the value of positive and negative relationships (see table 8). This question arose from several relationships discovered in the early data collection on literary figures that were antagonistic in nature (legal actions against individuals, "former friends," public disputes, etc.). Of all the questions in the survey, this one garnered the most agreement among survey participants. Nearly two-thirds strongly agreed and over one-quarter agreed; 6.8 percent were neutral and not one participant disagreed or strongly disagreed. It appears that negative relationships are considered to be as significant to contextual description as positive ones.

Table 8. Questions about the nature of relationships
(n = 133)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
There is value in recording both positive and negative relationships (e.g., litigants, "enemies," etc.)	86 (64.7%)	38 (28.6%)	9 (6.8%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)

A third question provided a list of factors associated with relationships, and participants were asked to select those factors that were considered to be important in light of the description of relationships. Participants were instructed to select all that apply. All four factors had high yields, with the type of relationship (familial, social, professional, etc.) considered important by an almost unanimous result (98.5% or 131 of 133). The other three, strength of relationship, directionality of relationship (influenced by, biographer of, etc.), and date of relationship all yielded over two-thirds of participants' selections. The

strength of the relationship was the least popular of the options, yielding only 71.4 percent and directionality with 79.0 percent. Dates of relationship returned an unexpectedly low 83.5 percent. Directionality was particularly surprising as it constitutes a complex aspect to relationships. For example, if we are considering a widget maker for the Chrysler Corporation, the relationship between the two is not equal; rather, it depends on which end of that relationship you are viewing. Chrysler is very important to the widget maker (puts food on the table, a roof over his or her head); however, Chrysler has many widget makers, so any one individual widget maker is not necessarily going to be significant to Chrysler. Therefore, the relationship could be described as unidirectional. In contrast, individuals such as Lee Iacocca would have a bidirectional relationship, given that Chrysler's development was significantly impacted by Iacocca's leadership.

The final question on the survey allowed for open-ended comments; the range of responses demonstrate an unclear picture of relationships and their role in archival description. Respondents' comments range from opportunities to challenges presented by the inclusion of description around relationships as well as subsequent linking made possible by the EAC-CPF framework. Additional themes indicate areas for further reflection and resolution.

Many of the opportunities reported within the EAC-CPF framework focused on the advantage that relationship structures could provide to the researcher. "I think relationships are important cues in helping a researcher expand their work into people or areas that they might not otherwise have considered," said one respondent. Additionally, the description of relationships is seen to further the initial work of processing: "Relationships provide added context and added value to interpreting existing documentation but also offers insights on what may not be documented" and as an essential step in the process. "As I survey a new collection, relationships are one of the most important things I note and try to discover and analyze before I do any arranging." The importance of relationships was also generally discussed. One respondent commented that "relationships are among the most important facets in a collection and deserve a high priority in description. One cannot understand the historical value of an event, person, or organization without knowing [the] relationship among and between them." Additionally, "relationships that establish the identify of Person A as distinct from other persons with the same name should always be included, when possible in the biographical/historical description, whether the relationships are documented in the collection or not." This final comment also speaks to the issue of tying description decisions to the materials. This remains an area for debate. Is the description of an entity driven by the materials in a collection or should it be considered a separate descriptive task that then supports the description of materials? This is further discussed below.

Other opportunities that relationships offered users were explored by survey participants: "Describing relationships may help users/researchers track other source[s] that bear on their topics," and "these additional access points can help researchers with discoverability of important, but previously hidden collections." In particular, the descriptions of relationships are considered to be "important cues in helping a researcher expand their work into people or areas that they might not otherwise have considered. If they're

writing a book on Entity A, and we have a very small collection of A's stuff but we mention that he was influenced by his work with Entity B, for whom we have a large collection, that's potentially a very useful link." Relationships are also seen to free collections from the isolation of individual repositories: "As linking relationships become more important, any information about relationships between entities becomes more useful—collections no longer live in isolation," and relationships offer a "new lens through which to view not just a single collection but a set of collections."

There were challenges considered, though. The time expenditure on a description program creates some issues, particularly given recent trends to minimize this use of resources: "I do believe MPLP *is* a factor to consider and apply when performing description. So, if it takes more than a whisker of time to research it or to find it in the collection—I may not bother" (emphasis in original). More fundamental issues, though, were also raised: "I think it is very hard to predetermine the significance of relationships. Many are hard to define, or may be defined only ephemerally," which seems to indicate that the context of the relationship itself needs to be taken into consideration when making the decision to document it.

Some participants indicated what they saw as the real dangers posed by relationship depiction. First, there were fundamental issues of *publishing* relationship information: "One barrier in my institution setting to fully fleshing out the nature of relationships is the potential to portray 3rd parties . . . in a negative light. A drastic example is one creator who kept a list of colleagues who supported her, and a list of those who were 'against' her." There was also fear that relationship description could provide only a partial picture: "Archival collections provide details, but even the most complete collection can't provide the full picture. Some things just aren't recorded or preserved," and "context is important but so is completeness. Relationships [may] be documented thoroughly in a collection but this may only reflect a partial view of what the relationship actually was." These reservations were contrasted, however, with the recognition that there is not one single appropriate approach: "I think it's important to factor in the objectivity and/or subjectivity of the relationships. In certain fields like the medical field, for example, relationships between colleagues and influences can be more directly traced and established than, for example, literary influences. So, in that sense, contextualizing records can be more appropriate for some repositories/institutions than others."

There were several comments that support the traditional belief that archival description is a neutral or non-influencing science. One respondent commented that "neutrality in basic description about archives is highly desirable," and another stated that "providing as much information without interpreting is important when describing collection[s] and converting into metadata." These comments indicate that some in the descriptive community are still struggling to rein in the role of interpretation in archival description. The description of relationships and the decision to determine one as important or significant appears to threaten the apparent objectivity that is a goal (whether realizable or not) of archival description. In contrast, other comments seemed to come to terms with this:

> It is the Archivist's job to provide information about the collection and its creator(s) to assist the researcher in interpreting and evaluating the collection materials. Some of this information will necessarily require a subjective decision by the Archivist about the "importance" of a particular relationship. The researcher may interpret the relationship differently than the Archivist, but that does not mean that the information is either useful or misleading in any way—it is simply contextual information to be used as the researcher sees fit. On the other hand, the Archivist should not throw in everything. Completely unrelated contextual information can serve to obscure what is "important" in the collection, as well as mislead the researcher into thinking that it "must be important if it was included here."

The archival descriptive community will continue to straddle the objective/subjective line as an integral aspect of the nature of its work. Decisions are made, and those decisions reflect a subjective position. By engaging in these discussions, however, that subjective position can be a professional one too. As detailed in *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*, professional judgment is a cornerstone of descriptive practice: "The rules recognize the necessity for judgment and interpretation on the part of both the person who prepares the description and the institution responsible for it."[10]

One of the most telling conclusions to draw from the comments provided with the survey is that archivists have a difficult time considering their descriptive work outside of the presence of a specific collection of materials. This may explain the lack of disparity in the two series of scenarios discussed above. Respondents' assessments of the significance of relationships do not appear to be tied to whether or not the relationship is documented within a collection of materials. This may indicate that archivists consider most notions through the lens of collections or materials rather than through the lens of creators. Despite that, archivists appear to be unaware of this perspective:

> The archivist has to be aware of these relationships, either through working with and processing the collection or through outside research/knowledge, in order to document them in description. I think generally if there is evidence of the relationships in the collection, that takes precedence/priority over lack of direct evidence but outside knowledge that a relationship existed.

In fact, many of the comments are written from the perspective of contextual information supporting the description of materials rather than standing as a separate instrument for access to archival materials. For instance, "relationships that influenced the record creator should always be noted." It is hard not to agree with this statement, but since it can be argued that all entities are record creators, and every relationship with another entity has some level of influence (positive, negative, or even disinterested), this statement supports the establishment of all relationships. This scenario only presupposes that a specific collection is not being considered instead of being guided by the materials.

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[10] *Describing Archives*, 4.

The issue of the centrality of the collection in descriptive practices, however, presents some contradictions in the comments: "I think generally if there is evidence of the relationships in the collection, that takes precedence/priority over lack of direct evidence but outside knowledge that a relationship existed" in contrast to "if an association is an important element of a person's biography, I would include it in a biographical sketch and note that the collection does not have information if the researchers would be seeking it." One participant tried to seek a balance between these tensions:

> In general, relationships are significant as it relates to the type of holdings in the collection. So if the particular collection which is held at our institution focus[es] around the person's career rather than family, it would be important to highlight professional relationships over personal relationships. When there is a mixture, as is often the case, it is often the relationships which are most prevalent (as . . . occurs in the most amount of the collection) which are highlighted.

Another participant went even further to find this balance:

> There should be some balance in the mind of the archivist while creating description between the significance of the relationship as documented in the collection and the apparent significance of the relationship to potential researchers in a larger context. This is informed guesswork, and archivists can never be truly objective, although they may strive to be so as much as possible. One letter from a highly significant historical figure may be as important or as useful to our users as many letters describing a rich relationship with a figure much less well known. A focus on the potential uses of the collection should help keep this balance.

As a whole, the open-ended responses illustrate that there is much still up for debate about the description of relationships. It also indicates that the descriptive community is ready and willing to participate in a discussion on the topic. Of the participants who addressed the relationship-related questions (beyond the demographic questions), a full one-third provided additional comments on relationships in the open-ended portion of the survey. The descriptive community has an opportunity to harness the energy around the standard to work out the descriptive content issues that such encoding standards often bring to light.

EAC-CPF is not dependent on the existence of relationships but on the very real impact of an individual archivist including that relationship in the text and structure of her description. Automated means, such as SNAC's harvesting protocols, currently allow the descriptive community to leverage the descriptive work in new and interesting ways. That new functionality, however, can come at a cost. Information overload has a cognitive and psychic impact brought to the fore by the explosion of information made possible by the Internet and other electronic communication media.[11] The world of linked data raises the possibilities for a further inundation of electronic data that can contribute to the growing issue of information overload.

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[11] Woolfson, "Information Overload."

Conclusion.

New standards are challenging the archival descriptive community with some interesting choices. First, the ability to create explicit relationship structures requires an examination of the nature of relationships. This research is a first step in that direction. Relationships constitute an ongoing discussion, though. Relationships are the building blocks to networks. The nature of networks is such that any sense of boundary is a constructed one. Social networks are never-ending, and like the metaphor of constructing a quilt to tell stories, the edges of those quilts are intentionally determined. The outer seams are decided upon rather than a reflection of the world of relationships. This fact requires some serious attention to where the appropriate boundaries are for these networks. In a way, archivists have been doing this unconsciously in terms of the decisions they make when constructing narratives for those networks. Part 2 of this series will demonstrate those choices and raise further questions where inconsistency exists.

Second, the archival descriptive community is facing a new, broader descriptive environment. The relevance of information to the materials is a constant theme within the participant responses in the anecdotal evidence. Yet, when asked to consider a relationship within the context of the materials and without considering the materials, there is little appreciable difference in the importance of the relationship. This indicates a bipolar approach to relationships; that is, the significance of relationships can be evaluated regardless of the material, but when asked about description, the collection dictates the context. These are contradictory positions, although certainly not unforeseen. A review of manuals for archival description indicates that for biographical and historical notes, much of the guidance refers to the *collection* as a focal point for the content of the contextual information.[12]

There is a larger question that the archival descriptive community faces, though. To what extent does the role of archival description adjust from the description of the collection to the description of the collection along with a separate description of the entities responsible for or the subject of those materials? It is anticipated that a standard like EAC-CPF will have an impact on the way archivists approach description. While descriptive standards still emphasize the importance of contextual information as a part of the description of materials, aggregated products that focus on the description of entities free archivists to focus on what their collection documents about the entities. A comment from the survey hints to this: "Many times we all have parts of the same story and need to provide the links (or breadcrumbs) for researchers to make these connections." A challenge is still faced by aggregators to meld that description into a meaningful and comprehensive description of an entity outside of the context of a single collection, but moving forward it does not require a complete abandonment of the central focus for archivists—the materials in their charge.

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[12] Such manuals include Gracy, *Archives and Manuscripts*; Cook and Procter, *A Manual of Archival Description*; and, most recently, Millar, *Archives*.

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