

Personal collections through the lens of ageing

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My research interests focus on the intersection between personal collections and legacy, particularly around the creation, preservation and re-use of personal information in family and societal contexts. My past and current research have dealt with two topics: personal collections of significant individuals and personal collections of migrants.

The rationale behind researching these topics is that personal collections contain information whose value and potential for re-use change over time and space, and so do their owners (creators or curators). Information in personal collections supports people through their daily lives and work (Jones et al., 2017) and, looking retrospectively, can present a curated life story. However, many challenges exist in maintaining and making sense of collections over time--whether that is by the same owner who created them, when collections change ownership through inheritance within the family, or when personal collections are transferred to GLAM institutions (galleries, libraries, archives, museums).

I will now briefly summarise the two topics reflecting on how ageing aspects emerged from some of the findings.

1) Personal collections of significant individuals (Krtalić et al., 2021; Krtalić & Dinneen, 2022)

Significant individuals (such as writers, artists, public servants and others whose work marked and contributed to the development of society) create personal collections that shed light on their life and work, same as anyone else. However, those collections may contain some unique items, such as versions of manuscripts, original and unpublished artwork, records and documents about people, places and historical events that might be of public value and interest (Douglas & MacNeil, 2009; Woodham et al., 2017). The value of such collections has been well recognised by researchers and GLAM institutions who often acquire such collections, but many challenges exist arising from the nature, complexity and scope of personal collections. While better interaction and communication of expectations between the GLAM sector and potential donors can address some of the issues, the creation and use of tools that assist organising and labeling the content of personal collections with future inheritance or transfer in mind can minimise some of the concerns (Dinnen et al., 2022).

In this research, the factor of ageing emerged in two ways. One, as people themselves age, they become more interested in what happens to their collections and how to curate their collections to tell the story of their life. For example, while interviewing significant individuals, those in the age group of seventy and above expressed deeper reflections about the value of their collections and possible transfer to a GLAM institution. Many found the time and motivation to start “sorting out” accumulated collections of their own or to explore collections inherited from deceased family members. The second point in relation to ageing refers to the fact that many personal collections created by significant individuals contain decades of information on various media and formats. In the case of artists’ collections, for example, respecting the ageing aspect of works of art can be crucial for authentic preservation and access.

1) Personal collections of migrants (Krtalić, 2021; Krtalić & Ihejirika, 2022)

In the voluntary migration context, personal collections are purposefully selected and organised documents and items that migrants bring when they move to new countries. On top of common management challenges, migrants face some unique factors such as rethinking the evidential, practical and sentimental value of personal collections across time and space or curating mementoes as evidence of prior lives and relationships when regulating their visa or citizenship status. In host countries, migrants use their personal collections as instruments of identity formation, self-awareness, and connections to cultural heritage (for example, book collections (Dali, 2004)). Such collections (often brought at great cost and cherished as unique in a foreign environment) are preserved and handed over to generations of descendants. In relation to ageing, personal collections of migrants need to be considered over *time* and *space*. The main challenge, in this case, is capturing memory, stories and knowledge away from the original cultural context and transferring such legacy between collections creators and other family members when their understanding may be marked by different cultural worldviews.

In both these examples (significant individuals and migrants), temporal and spatial factors shape contextual understanding, preservation and use of personal collections for legacy purposes. Ageing (of information and people) can also shed a different light on the attitudes to and practices of deletion. Deletion as a phenomenon is often viewed negatively and contrary to preservation (Hellmich & Dinneen, 2022). Deletion of information in the context of personal collections can be viewed as an act of forgetting self (e.g. removing the evidence of traumatic experiences from personal collections), preserving the privacy of significant individuals in the public domain, or a logical action resulting from the fact that things lose their importance with time.

To conclude, in my future research, I hope further to address personal collections through the lens of ageing and explore:

- How do attitudes to the preservation and deletion change as we age, and how these attitudes affect PIM practices?
- What does ageing mean for joint management of family collections?
- What ethical aspects emerge from the preservation and re-use of personal collections over time and space?

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