

Rethinking Original Order and Personal Records



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RÉSUMÉ Cet article présente une approche théorique différente pour considérer et appliquer le concept de l'ordre original dans le classement et la description de documents personnels. Tel qu'il est présentement entendu, l'ordre original ne tient pas compte de la réalité physique des documents, ce qui mène vers une approche qui, soit en extrapolant le concept par analogie ou en le rejetant carrément, ne permet pas de contextualiser adéquatement les documents personnels. En se concentrant sur les aspects théoriques du concept et l'esprit de base de ce principe, l'auteure redéfinit l'ordre original en tant que cadre conceptuel pour élucider le contexte et explique comment ce cadre facilite une approche du général au spécifique pour analyser un ensemble de documents personnels, peu importe s'il y a un ordre apparent ou logique. En centrant l'attention sur les liens entre les documents et les activités, l'ordre original comme cadre conceptuel permet à l'archiviste de mieux interpréter et représenter les facteurs clés relatifs à la gestion de documents personnels, à l'histoire de la garde des documents et à l'intervention archivistique, ces facteurs qui, avec le temps, influencent l'interprétation d'un fonds personnel.

ABSTRACT This article presents a different theoretical approach to considering and implementing the concept of original order in the arrangement and description of personal records. As currently conceived, original order does not address the physical realities of personal records and results in approaches that, whether in extending the concept by analogy or rejecting it outright, fail to adequately contextualize personal records. Concentrating on the theoretical aspects of the concept and the spirit behind the principle, this article rethinks original order as a conceptual framework for elucidating context, and suggests how it facilitates a top-down approach for analyzing a body of personal records regardless of whether or not there is a consistent, discernible order. By focusing attention on the relationships between records and activities, original order

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as a conceptual framework enables the archivist to better interpret and represent key factors relating to personal recordkeeping, custodial history, and archival intervention, which over time shape the meanings of a personal fonds.

Introduction

Any number of scenarios can present themselves when an archivist begins processing a body of personal records. Opening one box, one may find a mass of loose items that lack basic identifying information as well as any logical grouping into files or even physical folders. Opening another box, one may find a seemingly well-ordered range of correspondence files, only to discover on closer study that the organization is likely not the creator's own, but instead that of a subsequent custodian who took it upon himself or herself to prepare the material for donation to the archives. Opening yet another box, one may find material from one accession inexplicably arranged into files alphabetically by subject or format (such that "Applications for Grants," filed under "A," comes before "Correspondence," filed under "C," which comes before "Photographs," filed under "P"), reflecting work likely done by previous archives staff in accordance with earlier institutional procedures for accessioning and processing. Scenarios such as these render a literal interpretation of the archival concept of original order practically impossible when it comes to arranging and describing personal records.

Original order has always been a challenging concept for archivists who deal with personal records. From the time of its modern articulation in the Dutch *Manual*, if not before, the principle of respect for original order has been geared exclusively toward organizational records. Not only are personal records not addressed in the Dutch *Manual*, they are effectively dismissed as being "the purview of libraries and librarians."¹ The implicit, or not so implicit, message has long been that personal records are not of archival concern. While many archivists do in fact work within libraries, the preferred approach to processing personal fonds, particularly larger and more complex ones, is an archival one, rather than a bibliographic one.² So, whether or not the authors of the Dutch *Manual* would agree, personal records *are* of archival concern. In crafting an archival approach to the arrangement and description of personal records, archivists need specifically to address the concept of original order. Before disregarding the principle of respect for original order (the methodological concept)

- 1 Terry Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), p. 21.
- 2 While description lends itself more to a blending of archival and bibliographic techniques (for instance, many institutions create both multi-level finding aids and collection-level catalogue records for personal fonds), arrangement of larger fonds will typically require an exclusively archival approach.

as irrelevant outside of an organizational context, archivists must first consider the broader issues pertaining to the nature and history of records, and the perceived value of the creator's "system" of organization (the theoretical concept) that the principle was designed to address.³ In short, a different approach to original order with regard to personal records is needed to better facilitate the work of archival arrangement and description.

"[A]rchival principles are not fixed for all time, but, like views of history itself, or literature, or philosophy, reflect the spirit of their times and then are interpreted anew by succeeding generations."⁴ By configuring archival principles as a constantly evolving set of ideas, Terry Cook invites archivists to rethink and reinterpret the key concepts that inform and shape our individual and collective practice: in effect, to open up our understanding of archival theory and methodology to other previously unimagined possibilities. Such an invitation or opening up of archival theory and methodology is crucial when thinking about the concept of original order, and what it might mean for records created by individuals and families. As a hard and fast rule or an "immutable scientific law," original order is easy to interpret too narrowly and render practically irrelevant; it is often impossible to implement, especially in arranging and describing personal records; and it is tempting to reject outright. As a historically situated idea – neither "disinterestedly formed" nor "holding true for all time" – original order is open to (re)interpretation.⁵ With this in mind, this article aims to rethink original order as a conceptual framework for analyzing and understanding personal records in all their complexity *and* on their own terms, which is to say, according to how they were created, maintained, transmitted, and used over time.⁶

3 Frank Boles, for one, suggests that the principle of original order should be considered independently from the principle of provenance. Frank Boles, "Disrespecting Original Order," *American Archivist*, vol. 45, no. 1 (Winter 1982), pp. 26–32. Peter Horsman provides a counterpoint to this view, asserting that original order is an inward application of the principle of provenance and that "both parts [the outward and inward applications] of the Principle of provenance form an inseparable whole." Peter Horsman, "Taming the Elephant: An Orthodox Approach to the Principle of Provenance," *The Principle of Provenance: Report from the First Stockholm Conference on the Archival Principle of Provenance, 2–3 September 1993* (Stockholm, 1994), p. 51.

4 Cook, "What is Past is Prologue," p. 26.

5 According to Cook, "[archival] theory should not be seen as a set of immutable scientific laws disinterestedly formed and holding true for all time ... [the] changing nature of archival theory over time [is] a professional strength, not a weakness." Cook, "What is Past is Prologue," p. 46.

6 Elsewhere, I have explored the archivist's process of analysis in arrangement and description as part of better understanding how the archivist goes about implementing and realizing archival principles in practice; in addition, I have characterized arrangement as a process of creating relationships, rather than merely identifying them. In this view of things, the archival concepts of provenance and original order serve more as a conceptual framework for understanding, interpreting, and representing a body of records, than strict guidelines

Limitations of the Concept and the Implications for Practice

Fairly standard definitions exist for the archival concept and principle of original order;⁷ the idea, however, has meant different things to different archival thinkers over the years. Some have seen it as grounds for debating the validity and significance of applying archival principles to personal records.⁸ Others have seen it as an occasion to formulate alternate ideas to guide the practice

to be followed. Jennifer Meehan, "Making the Leap from Parts to Whole: Evidence and Inference in Archival Arrangement and Description," *American Archivist*, vol. 72, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2009), pp. 72–90. My goal in the current discussion is to elaborate on this view and to imagine some of the ways in which original order can serve as a conceptual framework.

- 7 The SAA Glossary defines "original order" as "the organization and sequence of records established by the creator of the records." Richard Pearce-Moses, "A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology," http://www.archivists.org/glossary/term_details.asp?DefinitionKey=69 (accessed on 6 December 2009). The Dutch *Manual* defines the principle of respect for original order as dictating that, "the system of arrangement must be based on the original organization of the archival collection, which in the main corresponds to the organization of the administrative body that produced it." S. Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, 2nd ed., trans. Arthur H. Leavitt (New York, 1968), p. 52.
- 8 The two sides of this debate are most clearly articulated in articles that originally appeared in the Australian archival journal *Archives and Manuscripts* in the late 1970s. On one side, Graeme T. Powell argues that the principle usually cannot be applied to personal records "owing to the disordered state in which they are received" and that even in instances when some semblance of original order exists, the principle should be observed only if the order is deemed significant, "that is, if it reveals or suggests the thoughts and ideas of the person who assembled the papers." Graeme T. Powell, "Archival Principles and the Treatment of Personal Papers," in *Debates and Discourses: Selected Australian Writings on Archival Theory, 1951–1990*, eds. Peter Biskup et al. (Canberra, 1995), p. 136. Chris Hurley takes up the other side of this debate, arguing that the value of original order for personal records is "the insight it gives into the purposes and activities which the records originally served and does not depend on its efficiency as filing or retrieval system." Chris Hurley, "Personal Papers and the Treatment of Archival Principles," in *ibid.*, p. 149. While I tend to agree with Hurley, I must admit that this debate does not resonate strongly with me since it is mainly concerned with instances when a discernable order exists and does not in any way address how to think about, or treat, records that lack a consistent, meaningful order. Still in Hurley's argument, we get an eloquent elaboration of the significance of the principle for personal records.

"Respect for original order does not depend upon there being an original numeration or alphabetisation to follow and it is not to be discarded merely because original order is uncharted or uncontrived. The best analogy is with the work of the archaeologist who does not abandon principles governing excavation work merely because instead of digging out a well ordered and well planned tomb in which placement and arrangement have been designed by its building to impart meaning and significance he is working on a rubbish heap; he knows that importance of juxtapositioning and relationships between the parts of a whole, even where the whole was never envisaged as such in the first place. This is equally true of archives work" (p. 146).

of arrangement and description.⁹ And still others have seen it as an opportunity for challenging the fundamental tenets of archival practice.¹⁰ Whatever the approach to considering original order, from prescriptive to critical, there are certain limitations to the concept as currently conceived. First, it puts a misplaced emphasis on filing schemes that manifest themselves in an observable way over broader record-keeping “systems” that may or may not leave a visible trace. As a result, our collective thinking on the subject is dominated by the notion of *organization*, which focuses narrowly on the filing activities of the creator, to the exclusion of the important notion of *accumulation*, which shifts the focus to the broader substantive activities of the creator that gave rise to the records in the first place.¹¹ Another limitation of the concept is the problematic connotations associated with the words “original” and “order.” Regardless of whether or not we can discern an order among the records before us, many question – and rightly so – whether we as archivists can ever really capture and represent the records *as they actually were*.¹² Even though the work of arrangement is about finding appropriate places for records within the larger whole of the fonds, many archivists know, or at least suspect, that there is nothing “natural” about record-keeping practices per se and that, as a result, records have no “natural place.”¹³ But perhaps the biggest limitation of all is the fact that the archival concept of original order does not address what to do with, or even how to think about, records that lack a consistent, discernible order, which is the case more often than not with personal records.

- 9 For instance, Frank Boles puts forth the theory of “simple usability,” according to which “[r]ecords in an archival institution should be maintained in a state of usability, their exact arrangement being the simplest possible which assures access to the documentation.” Boles, p. 31. Regardless of the merit or validity of Boles’s idea, I find the reasoning behind it to be extremely problematic. He makes a distinction between the evidential value of the documents and the evidential value of the filing system, and ends up placing a greater value on the “evidentially superior documents” than on their contexts of creation, maintenance, and use, all of which seems insupportable given the importance of context in understanding, let alone using, individual records as evidentiary sources.
- 10 See Brien Brothman, “Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice,” *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 78–100.
- 11 In reconceptualizing the fonds, Terry Cook associates provenance with creation/accumulation, and original order with organization. However, I do not believe this distinction holds up with regards to personal records. See Terry Cook, “The Concept of the Archival Fonds: Theory, Description, and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era,” in *The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice*, ed. Terry Eastwood (Ottawa, 1992), p. 36.
- 12 Tom Nesmith, for one, suggests that, “in place of original order, we should speak of the received order of records, which would refer to the order they are in when they are received by an archives.” He reasons that received order “may be more like a snapshot of a moment in time, not *the* original order but a possible approximation of it.” Tom Nesmith, “Reopening Archives: Bringing New Contextualities into Archival Theory and Practice,” *Archivaria* 60 (Fall 2005), p. 264.
- 13 Brothman, p. 84.

There is, in practice, undoubtedly a wide range of interactions with, and implementations of, the concept of original order and the principle of respect for original order. Yet, the constraints of the concept are ultimately limiting to how archivists conceptualize and carry out the work of arranging and describing personal records. At one end of the spectrum, archivists may seek to extend the concept to personal records by analogy, working to understand the ways in which personal records are *like* organizational records, rather than working to understand personal records on their own terms. This approach tends to ignore certain underlying assumptions that could have very different meanings for records created outside an organizational setting (e.g., the fact that a lack of apparent order is not the same thing as a lack of original order). This approach also glosses over important differences in the physical and material realities of personal records and the impact of these on the perceived intellectual order(s) of a fonds. Differences include the ways in which records are created, used, and maintained initially and over time by the creator (*personal recordkeeping*); the ways in which records are used, maintained, and transmitted by subsequent custodians (*custodial history*); and the ways in which records are treated once in archival custody, even before being formally processed (*archival intervention*). For instance, an individual creator may or may not have a system for organizing his or her files during the time he or she is actively using them (which is not to say that the creator did not create, accumulate, and use the records in a particular way, only that he or she did not maintain them in a particular way). When it comes time to donate his or her records to the archives, the creator may make an effort to organize the files for donation, imposing a new or different system at the end of the records' active life. Likewise, family members, friends, or executors, charged as custodians, may have a hand in the fonds when preparing it for donation, which could involve merely (re)organizing files or selecting what should stay and what should go the archives. The records may come to the archives in multiple, different accessions over several years, with no explanation about what comes when and why. Each accession may receive, in whole or part, some level of treatment that could involve simple re-housing or preliminary processing so that the material can be accessed by researchers, with no clear documentation of what has been done when and why. These and other factors relating to personal recordkeeping, custodial history, and archival intervention represent important aspects of context that are crucial for understanding and drawing conclusions about the complex meaning(s) of a body of personal records.¹⁴

14 Heather MacNeil argues that the “custodial bond” – the relations between a body of records and the various custodians, including archivists and archival institutions, that interact with it – is as important as the archival bond for interpreting and representing the meaning of a body of records, and that any change effected by the custodian(s) is a part of the history of the records. She introduces the idea of “archivalterity” to refer to “the acts of continuous

At the other end of the spectrum, archivists may opt to abandon the idea altogether and instead utilize more user-based notions for interpreting and representing personal records. This invariably leads to more ad hoc approaches to arrangement and description that place a greater emphasis on utility and user access than on the contexts of records creation and use. By and large, these approaches are not rooted in understanding personal records on their own terms, but rather in meeting the anticipated expectations of users, which are bound to differ from user group to user group, and to change over time as well as from repository to repository. These approaches are not particularly concerned with any but the most obvious factors relating to the personal record-keeping practices of the creator and effectively sidestep the issues of custodial history and archival intervention. As a result, they do not adequately address the physical realities of personal records nor represent the various contextualities that shape the possible meaning(s) of the fonds as a whole. Even though the emphasis is on access (in terms of location and retrieval) above all else, ad hoc, user-based approaches risk sacrificing the possibility of value-added, contextualized access to large and complex bodies of personal records.¹⁵

In practice, most archivists who take an archival approach to arranging and describing personal records probably fall somewhere between these two poles. Many will try to observe the principle of respect for original order when a meaningful order can be discerned among the records as they exist at the time of processing. When no order can be found, archivists will impose an order (or arrangement) that is deemed most useful to researchers, that is in accordance with institutional guidelines or policy, or that fits some other bill. This is as far as the current conception of original order *as an ends* to be achieved can reasonably take archivists in arranging and describing a body of personal records: if an order exists, then archivists will observe it, preserve it, protect it, perhaps even restore it.

However, in most cases when dealing with personal records, archivists must go farther than this in order to adequately contextualize records for users. Not only is it necessary to identify and understand the existing physical order(s) of a fonds, it is also necessary to assess its relative value or meaning, for instance, to

and discontinuous change that transform the meaning and authenticity of a fonds as it is transmitted over time and space." Heather MacNeil, "Archivalterity: Rethinking Original Order," *Archivaria* 66 (Fall 2008), p. 14.

15 Horsman writes: "[I]t is the task of the archivist to make a representation of the original context, so that researchers will be able not only to retrieve information, but above all to interpret the information in the original, administrative, functional context. That is what archivists are on this earth for, that is their added value." Horsman, pp. 59–60. While others highlight a fundamental tension in the archival profession between serving the records (presumably for their own sake) and serving users, Horsman suggests that by placing and preserving records in context (in accordance with archival principles), archivists are facilitating the interpretation of the records and hence serving the user.

what extent it reflects the activities of the creator. Archivists need to understand the evolving set of circumstances surrounding the fonds as well as some of the other possible intellectual orders of the records that might reflect the different spheres of activities within which the records participated. And archivists need to devise an arrangement that reflects the sphere(s) of activity deemed most appropriate for elucidating the overall context of a fonds.¹⁶ Archivists must conceive of original order differently to adequately understand and contextualize personal records: rather than thinking of it as an ends to be achieved, it might better serve archival purposes by thinking of it *as a means* for carrying out arrangement and description.¹⁷

Rethinking Original Order as a Conceptual Framework

One possible way for original order to serve as a means, rather than an ends, is to think of it less as a guideline, instructing archivists to preserve the existing order when, and only when, that order is deemed meaningful or even to restore some previous order that is presumed to be “original,” and instead to think of it more as a conceptual framework for analyzing a body of personal records, regardless of whether or not there is a consistent, discernible order.

It is possible to rethink original order in this way by focusing more on the spirit behind the principle of respect for original order, rather than trying (and failing) to follow it to the letter. Terry Cook suggests that the authors of the Dutch *Manual* considered the principle of respect for original order to be “the most important [rule] of all ... from which all other rules follow,” because they “believed that by so respecting the arrangement of original record-keeping systems, the all important archival activity of elucidating the administrative context in which the records were originally created could be much facilitated.”¹⁸ The spirit behind the principle then is about elucidating the context in which the

16 Archivists’ efforts in this regard are often hampered by the fact that physical arrangement so often mirrors intellectual arrangement in the processing of personal fonds. While there may be practical reasons for doing so (such as facilitating the paging of material by archives staff), the result is that only a singular view of a fonds is ever presented, which may very well block the possibility of other views. Think of the different views possible, if a finding aid were to present the intellectual arrangement of a fonds, and an inventory – either separate from, or part of, the finding aid – were to present the physical arrangement representing the existing order of a fonds. The intellectual arrangement would still contextualize the records for users; users would still be able to locate and retrieve the material in which they are interested (even though paging might be a bit more complicated); and moreover, users would be able to draw their own conclusions about the relative meaning of the existing order of the records.

17 While the “ends and means” metaphor may not be a perfect fit, I am using it to suggest that the concept of original order needs to focus more on the process, rather than on the beginning or end product of arrangement and description.

18 Cook, “What is Past is Prologue,” p. 21.

records were created, which is as important for interpreting and representing personal records as it is for organizational records. Yet, this is not limited to the context in which the records were maintained (which the current emphasis on *organization* implies), but also includes the contexts of creation, transmittal, and use (which a greater emphasis on *accumulation* would incorporate). The specific aspects of context that need to be illuminated to a greater degree for personal records are: 1) functional context (the initial framework of action within which the records participated)¹⁹ and 2) broader contextualities (to paraphrase Tom Nesmith, the varied processes, subsequent to the initial inscription of the records, which have also contributed to their “creation” in a broader sense),²⁰ including but not limited to the processes of maintenance, transmittal, and use by any and all custodians (archivists included).

In order to rethink original order as a conceptual framework for elucidating context, it is also necessary to clarify and elaborate what the concept of original order signifies. While focusing on the relationships between and among records, original order is ultimately concerned with the relationships between records and activities, the assumption being that the internal relationships of a body of records bear a direct relation to the development of the specific activity or activities that gave rise to the records.²¹ By stipulating that the order in which the creator maintained the records be preserved, the concept of original order posits: 1) that these internal relationships exist or should exist; 2) that they have meaning beyond simply illuminating the filing scheme or organizational habits of the creator; and 3) that they establish important aspects of the overall context

19 While archivists do not often think of functions as relating to personal spheres of activity, my use of the term “functional context” is meant to emphasize the high-level activities stemming from the various personal and/or professional roles of the individual creator and leading to the creation, maintenance, transmittal, and use of records. A functional approach to analyzing personal records is not necessarily the same thing as a functions-based approach.

20 Nesmith, p. 263.

21 The term “activity” is used throughout this article to refer broadly to the individual, multiple, and/or overlapping purposes, impulses, intentions, tasks, and actions – and not just those of a transactional nature – that led to the initial creation of records and their maintenance, transmittal, and use (by the creator and others) over time. Activities, such as the creation of literary works, may stem directly from the professional role of an individual. Other activities, such as keeping a diary, may relate more broadly to personal impulses to remember, document, or narrate, and may reflect the internal life of the individual more than the surface activity of diary keeping. It is possible for different activities over time to result in the creation and recreation of one record or set of records, such as a letter originally kept for personal reasons which is later incorporated into a literary or artistic work. It is also possible for there to be records that do not clearly or directly relate to any known activity, as well as activities that do not result in the creation of records. For more on the impulses behind personal records and recordkeeping, see Catherine Hobbs, “The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals,” *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001), pp. 126–35, and Richard J. Cox, *Personal Archives and a New Archival Calling: Readings, Reflections and Ruminations* (Duluth, 2008).

of a body of records and are essential for understanding the records over time. The concept of original order implies that archivists can come to understand the relationships between records and activities, or the external relationships of a body of records, through examining, assessing, and interpreting the internal relationships. However, in the case of personal records, archivists cannot assume that the extant relationships between and among records are meaningful or that they shed any useful light on the spheres of activity in which the creator was engaged. This is not to say that archivists cannot come to understand the important relationships between records and activities, but that archivists cannot do so based solely on examining the records as they exist.

The current concept of original order serves, more or less, as a bottom-up approach to interpreting and representing a body of records, one that implies a movement in perception and comprehension from the internal relationships of the records (or internal structure of provenance) to the external relationships that establish context (or external structure of provenance).²² In order to interpret and represent a body of records lacking a meaningful internal structure, archivists need to think of original order instead as a top-down approach. Rather than being concerned with identifying and preserving the existing relationships between and among records, archivists should analyze and imagine the possible relationships between records and activities. Based on an understanding of these external relationships, archivists then effectively *create* the internal relationships of a fonds by putting the records in the most appropriate place(s) to reflect the development of the specific activities that gave rise to them and/or the subsequent activities in which they were involved. In other words, based upon an understanding of the contexts of records creation, maintenance, transmittal, and use, archivists determine an arrangement for the records that elucidates certain important aspects of their context, thereby creating the internal and external relationships of the body of records.²³

As a top-down approach to interpreting and representing a body of records, the concept of original order no longer operates as a strict guideline to be followed, but rather as a conceptual framework for analyzing records. As such, it focuses attention on the relationships between records and activities. Understanding these relationships is the crucial task of archival arrangement. Yet,

22 Internal and external structures of provenance are discussed in Terry Eastwood, "Putting the Parts of the Whole Together: Systematic Arrangement of Archives," *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000), pp. 93–116, and Horsman, pp. 51–63.

23 In advocating a top-down approach to arranging and describing personal records, I am not trying to gloss over or sidestep the inherent complexity or "messiness" of personal fonds. Nor am I suggesting that it is always possible or even desirable to impose an order on seeming chaos. Rather I am trying to articulate a structured way for archivists to think about, understand, and analyze the various states of order or disorder present in any given fonds, which may merely reflect or express what many archivists have already been doing in their individual practice.

these relationships are only ever conceptual entities; they are neither tangible nor visible in and among the records, nor do they necessarily exist before a user (in this case, an archivist) comes to comprehend them. So, to understand and create these relationships, the archivist must first understand the evolving set of circumstances surrounding a particular body of records. This understanding provides the grounds for evaluating and determining the possible meaning of the existing order(s) of a fonds (for example, to what extent the records reflect the development of the creator's activities or other subsequent processes in which they were involved), and for creating an order that best reflects the relationships (as the archivist understands them) between the records and the range of activities that gave rise to them. In this scenario, rather than having to rely on the existing order of the records themselves to provide clues as to the meaning and context of the fonds (and being at a complete loss when no order is discernible or deemed meaningful), archivists rely instead on their own contextual understanding to create and communicate the relationships that give meaning to a body of records. While the focus of original order as a conceptual framework is not necessarily on preserving the order of the records in which the creator maintained them, this idea still adheres to the spirit behind the principle by facilitating a process aimed at elucidating the context(s) within which the records were created, in the broadest sense.²⁴

As a conceptual framework, original order serves as a means for understanding personal records in all their complexity and on their own terms, and for creating the internal and external relationships that contextualize the records for users. Conceiving of original order in this way necessitates a shift in how archivists conceptualize and carry out the work of archival arrangement. Archivists can no longer think of arrangement as merely a process of *identifying* the meaningful relationships between and among records. (This particular characterization never really served the purposes of those working with personal records anyway.) Instead, archivists must acknowledge that the process is really one of *creating* the relationships that give meaning to a body of records. The inherent creativity and subjectivity of the process should not be seen as a limitation so much as an opportunity. It grants some leeway to creatively engage and interact with the ideas meant to inform and shape archival practice,

24 Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil argue that the assumptions underpinning the interpretive framework for arranging literary archives need to be qualified. Those assumptions concern what the records might reveal about the individual, what the reconstruction of the records' original order might make possible, and whether it is possible for archivists to keep from imposing their intentions on the representation of records. Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil, "Arranging the Self: Literary and Archival Perspectives on Writers' Archives," *Archivaria* 67 (Spring 2009), pp. 25–39. In highlighting the contingent nature of the relationship between records and activities and the creative role of the archivist in representing those relationships, my articulation of original order is intended to qualify those same assumptions as they relate more broadly to personal records.

and to consider and capitalize on the imaginative work involved in so much of archival practice. The discussion so far has sought to do the former by rethinking original order as a conceptual framework; the rest of the discussion will seek to do the latter by exploring some of the ways in which original order might actually work as a conceptual framework.

Implementing Original Order as a Conceptual Framework

Original order provides a sense of direction to the archivist's analysis of the records as they exist at the time of processing, as well as a frame of reference for understanding a body of personal records on its own terms, that is, according to how over time the records were created, maintained, transmitted, and used by the creator and all subsequent custodians, including archivists. In doing so, it offers a possible means for imagining certain key factors relating to personal recordkeeping, custodial history, and archival intervention.

In imagining the personal record-keeping practices of a particular creator, the archivist is first and foremost concerned with understanding: 1) the creator's process of making and keeping records; 2) the various creative or personal business processes through which the creator carried out his or her main activities; and 3) how, where, and when these processes intersect. To this end, the archivist must address the following general questions: What are the specific activities in which the creator was involved? What are the different personal and professional roles the creator occupied at different times throughout his or her life and career? What types of records did the creator create and accumulate? Which records were created in the course of which activity? Employing original order as a conceptual framework allows for the framing of questions such as these that seek to shed light on the relationships between the records and the activities of the creator, and to illuminate important aspects of functional context.

The archivist's process will typically move from the general to the specific, though the level to which this analytical and imaginative work is done will likely be different for each fonds. In the absence of any existing filing scheme, imagining the creator's process of making and keeping records entails study of the records themselves in their existing state, combined with knowledge of the history of records in general. One gleans what one can from the format and structure of the records, as well as their informational content, while applying what one knows about the forms, functions, and physical characteristics of different record formats to those found in the fonds at hand.²⁵ The function of one format (photographs, for instance) can vary widely, so it is not enough to merely identify the formats present in a fonds; the archivist must also seek to

25 See, for instance, Terry Cook's discussion of the "history of the record" approach advocated by Tom Nesmith. Cook, "What is Past is Prologue," pp. 35–40.

understand the sequence in which the records may have been created, how the creator may have used the records, and to what end(s). Doing so requires the study and analysis of the creator, not only in terms of *what* he or she was doing, but also *how* and *why*. The scope and level of this type of study and analysis are more than what is typically required for writing a biographical history, thereby representing the provenancial context of the records. It involves a top-down, critical analysis that includes a breakdown of the creator's activities into their component processes (in other words, a type of functional analysis), and addresses the intentions (or aims, purposes, and designs) of the creator, as the archivist understands them.²⁶

For instance, an addition to the papers of government lawyer Felix S. Cohen arrived at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library in a general state of disarray and in inadequately labelled folders. My approach to processing the fonds involved identifying Cohen's various professional roles (lawyer, writer, teacher, member of various political and social organizations), surveying the contents of the files to determine which of these spheres of activity likely gave rise to which records, and then grouping the files into series according to these main activities.²⁷ Since Cohen's legal work on behalf of Native Americans is the most significant part of his career (and the reason why his papers were acquired in the first place), I carried out more detailed work within the series of legal files to group them into subseries according to the different legal spheres within which he worked (for instance, Indian Affairs, Solicitor's Office, Private Practice), and within particular subseries to arrange files according to the development of specific activities (for instance, the drafting and implementation of the *Indian Reorganization Act*). The activities of the creator were largely identified for me (thanks to the curator and archives staff who had processed the previous group of Cohen material), and so my process was, in effect, one of analyzing the records and making connections between the files and the creator's activities, and in

26 Heather MacNeil discusses intentionality as it relates to original order in her comparisons of archival theory and textual criticism. Heather MacNeil, "Picking Our Text: Archival Description, Authenticity, and the Archivist as Editor," *American Archivist*, vol. 68, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2005), pp. 264–78. See also MacNeil, "Archivalterity," pp. 1–24. Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil also problematize the extent to which a fonds can be thought of as a true reflection of the creator, especially for writers' archives. See Douglas and MacNeil, pp. 33–38. Even though there are limits to what a fonds reveals about a creator or what an archivist can know or understand about a creator's activities and intentions, understanding these aspects of context and representing them through arrangement and description will continue to be the archivist's aim in analyzing a body of records. However, our assumptions and conclusions must always of necessity be qualified.

27 While this example focuses on the professional role of the individual, the same type of analysis was carried out to identify and understand the material documenting more personal aspects of the individual's life. In some cases, such as writers' fonds, the professional and personal roles of the creator are so intertwined as to render a strict distinction between the two practically impossible.

certain cases, imagining the creator's process of carrying out certain activities in order to arrange the files in relation to each other.²⁸

Having a sense, on the one hand, of the forms and functions of the records in a given fonds and, on the other hand, of the processes and intent behind the creator's main activities makes it possible for the archivist to imagine the particular points of intersection between the record-keeping and personal business or creative processes of the creator – those points being when the actual records were likely created, accumulated, maintained, and/or used by the creator. The archivist is in effect imagining the personal record-keeping “system” of the individual creator and laying the groundwork for making the connection between the physical record and the past activity that gave rise to it. Making this connection enables the archivist to bring material related by function or activity together through arrangement, whether at the series, subseries, file, or, less likely, item level; and it is through this arrangement that the archivist creates the relationships between records and activities, and elucidates important aspects of the functional context of the records.

A grasp of the functional context of personal records makes possible one view of a fonds, which is crucial for understanding the records according to how they were created and used by the creator, both initially and over time. Yet, the creator's intentions and activities are not the only ones at play in the formation of a body of records. The custodian(s) of a fonds – friends, family, executors – oftentimes play a significant role in shaping the fonds as a whole. Archivists' notion of custodial history, especially as it pertains to personal records, is too often limited to the immediate source of acquisition or history of ownership.²⁹ While this information is important for understanding how the records came to be in the archives, it does not address the impact of the custodian(s) upon the records, and the changing effects of time and place. Yet, the nature and extent of this impact are important to understand when arranging a personal fonds. Rather than obscuring the original context of the records, factors of custodial history (or the maintenance, use, and transmittal of the records by the custodians) comprise part of the various contextualities relevant to understanding the

28 The finding aid for the Felix S. Cohen Papers Addition can be found at <http://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.cohenadd> (accessed on 6 December 2009).

29 Laura Millar critiques the narrow definition of descriptive elements for “immediate source of acquisition” and “custodial history” in the Canadian *Rules for Archival Description*, and calls for a broader focus that would encompass creator history, records history, and custodial history. Laura Millar, “The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time,” *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002), pp. 1–15. In a similar vein, Ala Rekrut highlights the limitations of archival descriptive standards and documentation practices for representing how custodians and archivists shape the physical characteristics of the records. Ala Rekrut, “Material Literacy: Reading Records as Material Culture,” *Archivaria* 60 (Fall 2005), pp. 11–37.

records on their own terms.³⁰

In imagining the custodial history of a particular fonds, the archivist is concerned with understanding the intentions and activities of the various custodians and the possible ways in which the records were used and maintained by those custodians, as well as the possible ways in which the records were transmitted across time and space. The broadest question the archivist will typically ask about custodial history is: How did the records come to be in archival custody? In this instance, original order as a conceptual framework allows for the framing of more specific questions that seek to get at the relationships between the records and the activities and intentions of the custodian(s), such as: What is the relation between creator and custodian? What role did the custodian occupy with regards to the records (e.g., steward, protector, or interpreter)? How and why did the custodian use the records over time? In what way did the custodian contribute to the overall creation of the records? How and why did the custodian maintain the records, and how did this differ from how the creator maintained them? What role did the custodian play in transmitting the records (as a whole or in parts) over time and space? There is typically not much, if any, direct information available to the archivist about these particular facts of the custodial history, but what clues there are (annotations on individual items, handwriting on the folders, or possibly correspondence with the archives found in the collection file) could be used to imagine and draw certain conclusions about the possible interaction(s) between the custodian and the records. Moreover, what the archivist has been able to glean about the personal record-keeping “system” of the individual creator can shed light on certain aspects of custodial history by helping the archivist to imagine what traces may have been left by someone other than the creator (for instance, what orders may have been imposed by a custodian while preparing the fonds for donation to the archives). The point of this imaginative exercise is not to attempt to restore the creator’s order (assuming there was any to being with), but to understand an important element of the overall contextuality of the records in order to make it known to users, most likely through description, but perhaps one day through alternate, virtual arrangements.

For instance, Betty Cornell Benton donated the papers of her brother, artist Joseph Cornell to the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution. Evidenced by notes and annotations in her hand, Cornell’s sister likely went through the entire fonds item by item and had a hand in organizing part or all of the material. In the case of the general correspondence, it seemed most probable that the consistent alphabetical organization by surname was either her own or another’s, rather than Cornell’s. This is not to say that Cornell did not arrange his correspondence alphabetically, but that there was no way to ascer-

30 MacNeil, “Archivalterity,” p. 14.

tain this; at the same time, there were some clues suggesting that he might have organized some correspondence chronologically. In arranging and describing the correspondence, my task was not to try to restore Cornell's order, whatever that may have been, but to clarify the existing order and to explain its likely origin.³¹

Another important element of contextuality to consider when analyzing and arranging a body of personal records is the impact of archival intervention(s). When trying to make sense of the current state of the records as a first step in processing, a common difficulty is grasping what work was done by previous archives staff, when, and what effect it had on the fonds as a whole. Part of the archivist's process then is to imagine the particular nature and role of archival intervention in any given fonds, factors which are bound to be different in each case and could range from re-housing material and transcribing folder titles to removing material from a fonds for a variety of reasons. The broadest question the archivist will typically ask in this regard is: How were the records treated in archival custody before being formally processed? Again, in this instance, original order as a conceptual framework allows for the framing of more specific questions that seek to get at the relationship between the records and the activities and intentions of the archivist. These would be a more general set of questions aimed at illuminating a body of practice within an institution, rather than the activities of a particular individual: What is the history of archival processing in general, and what is the history of institutional policies and procedures for handling material in particular? How have these changed over time? What is the mission of the institution and what role do technical services play? What is the purpose behind an institution's approach to processing, and how has this changed over time? What role did the previous archivist or archives staff member play in the overall creation of the records, as they exist in their current state? Information about these archival interventions is not often readily available to the archivist, given a general lack of documentation about policies and procedures at various times as well as a lack of processing information about particular fonds.³² But what information is available could be used to imagine and draw conclusions about what may have gone on between archives staff and the records. And again, what the archivist has gleaned about the personal record-keeping "system" of the individual creator can shed light

31 The finding aid for the Joseph Cornell Papers can be found at <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collectiononline/cornjose/overview.htm> (accessed on 6 December 2009). See in particular the arrangement note for Series 2: Correspondence.

32 Elsewhere, I have discussed the need for documentation of an archivist's activities in arrangement and description. See Meehan, "Making the Leap from Parts to Whole," pp. 86–89, and Jennifer Meehan, "Grounds for Trust: Arrangement and Description Documentation" (paper presented at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Calgary, Alberta, 15 May 2009).

on this aspect of contextuality as well, by helping the archivist to differentiate between the various traces left among the records and thus to imagine the hand of the previous archivist or archives staff member in the fonds.

The point of this exercise is not to criticize or apologize for the work of those who have gone before, nor to necessarily try to undo it, but rather to illuminate and elucidate an important element of the overall context of the fonds. Moreover, as we see the impact of previous archivists upon the records, we must acknowledge our own impact in everything we do to preserve and make records accessible. This means beginning to think of ourselves as one of the creators of each fonds that we process, rather than an objective third party, and recognizing the importance of archival context (that is, what happens to the records in archival custody and what goes on between the archivist and the records) for understanding personal records on their own terms.

For instance, the papers of art critic and writer Elizabeth McCausland were donated to the Archives of American Art in several accessions over a period of forty years before I sat down to fully process them in 2006. Common practice over the years was for some level of processing to be done upon receipt of each accession, the main purpose of which was to prepare the material for microfilming. It was also the case that there was no professional archival staff until the last few decades; therefore, the previous approach to processing was not an archival one. Even though there was no documentation about the processing work done on the McCausland Fonds, I gathered from what I knew of the institution's history that the alphabetical ordering of files was likely one imposed by previous archives staff, who were more concerned with physically organizing the material for microfilming than with contextualizing the records for users. Based upon this assessment and the need to integrate several different accessions, all of which had been ordered differently, I took a functional approach to intellectually and physically arranging the fonds, which in this case involved undoing the work of previous archives staff. However, the point is not the approach I took, but rather that imagining and assessing the meaning of different, possibly competing orders provided the grounds for determining how best to represent the records within this particular fonds.³³

Conclusion

In order to better contextualize personal records, archivists must strive to interpret and represent personal records on their own terms, rather than imposing conventions or schema based on either user expectations or analogies with organizational records. This necessitates not only rethinking original order and

33 The finding aid for the Elizabeth McCausland Papers can be found at <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collectiononline/mccaeliz/overview.htm> (accessed on 6 December 2009).

personal records, but also rethinking the interplay of context, content, and structure in the arrangement and description of a body of personal records. While the classical concept of original order assumes a single meaningful structure that sheds light on the context and content of a fonds and implies a unidirectional process of analysis that proceeds from the bottom up, original order as a conceptual framework suggests that an understanding of context and content can be employed to interpret the different possible structures present in a fonds or to create a meaningful structure, in the absence of a consistent, discernible one. Moreover, this rethinking of original order suggests that the analytical process is, or can be, multidirectional, proceeding from the top down, from what one knows about context to what one does not know about how the creator or subsequent custodians might have ordered or shaped the records; or proceeding horizontally from what one knows of functional context (how the creator shaped the records) to what one does not know of other contextualities (the custodial history and archival interventions); or proceeding from the outside in, from what one knows of the history of records to what one does not know about the function of a particular record format in a given fonds.

The relationship between record and activity is the interpretive framework for understanding and representing personal records in all their complexity and on their own terms. This framework provides archivists with a practical means for imagining the evolving set of circumstances (personal recordkeeping, custodial history, archival intervention) surrounding a specific fonds, and for creating the internal and external relationships that give meaning to a body of personal records. This rethinking of original order offers a different approach to the arrangement and description of personal records, one that facilitates the process of elucidating context, thereby adhering to the spirit behind the principle of respect for original order, and at the same time addresses the complicated physical realities of records created by individuals and families. The notion of original order as a conceptual framework also offers us an opportunity, on a collective level, to reshape how we as a profession conceptualize the work of arrangement and description and, on an individual level, how we as practitioners carry out this work and why.