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We Are What We Keep: The "Family Archive", Identity and Public/Private Heritage

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ABSTRACT

What do our possessions say about us? More specifically what do they say about our past, present and our future? Many families possess a "family archive"; documents, photographs, heirlooms, scrapbooks, recipes and a whole range of other items that "reveal insights" into past generations, and preserve family stories. They may never have thought of these assemblages as "archives", but by retaining and preserving possessions these items mold a sense of family identity either consciously or unconsciously. This article explores the initial findings of a series of focus groups conducted in the UK, which considers the "family archive" as an important and undervalued site of meaning and identity construction. The article also highlights the relationship between the "official" or publicly recognized heritage and "unofficial" or everyday/private heritage, locating the "family archive" across these domains. We argue for greater recognition and promotion of this "behind the scenes" heritage and for museums and archives to explore the potential opportunities that the engagement with the "family archive" offers for wider audience engagement.

Introduction

Many families amass archives that speak directly to their collective sense of self, curating and interpreting a multitude of materials – photographs, objects, documents – stored in attics, garages and cupboards, and, increasingly, on computers. Yet we know relatively little about the content of these archives and their creation, or the messages they transmit within the family unit. We suggest that this knowledge gap has consequences for the management of institutional archival practice, and for our understanding of how individuals consume, create and use history. What do families see as valuable to themselves as individuals, to their wider families, and to a bigger national history? What role does the family archive play in the construction of individual and family identity?

The following discussion explores initial findings from the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project *The Family Archive: Exploring Family Identities, Memories*

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and Stories through Curated Personal Possessions. This research project was designed to investigate how individual families maintain their own "archives" outside institutional structures, and the meanings with which these archives are imbued. The project as a whole was formed of two distinct phases. The first phase used three multi-period historical case studies to consider the definition, function, ownership and context of a "family archive" from the Roman period to the twentieth century (see Gloyn et al. 2018). The second phase, presented here, consisted of a series of focus groups held in the UK in 2015 to explore how families in contemporary society conceptualize the same four themes: the definition, function, ownership and context of the possessions they have amassed. Table 1 summarizes the questions that guided this exploratory research.

As well as considering the role of family archives, central to our discussion is the connection between the public and private realms in the cultural sector, as the distinction between these spaces arguably grows increasingly blurred. We suggest that the personal meanings and associations that everyday objects may possess can be recognized through the concept of "unmanaged" or "behind-the-scenes" heritage, defined as what lies beyond the realm of official heritage management structures (legislation, organizations, etc.) but is "even more meaningful" (Howard 2003, 1). We also recognize that the public-private or managed-unmanaged binaries may disguise a much more nuanced set of relationships and tensions, particularly around how we value particular forms of historical knowledge; our interest is in giving visibility to these. The family archive, we suggest, is essentially an example of heritage that resides in both managed and unmanaged heritage spheres. Thus the division between "unofficial" and "everyday" heritage raises important questions about what role more "formal" organizations, such as museums and archives, could play.

It is important to note that any discussion of the "family archive" and its relationship to more formal institutions is embedded in a distinct contemporary context. Museums and archives are increasingly interested in understanding "behind the scenes" heritage in order to more effectively facilitate access to the records and objects they hold in their collections. The growth in popularity of family history since the 1960s and a parallel increase in appetite for oral history and social history, and subsequently a "history from below" approach, associated with Raphael Samuel (1996) and the History Workshop Movement (as overviewed in Schwarz 1993) have arguably also given personal family histories a new significance, and as such make a consideration of contemporary family archiving practices particularly timely.

The trend towards engaging the public has also been marked by a dramatic increase in the number of archives, museums and other cultural institutions calling upon the public to assist in cataloguing and interpreting collections, frequently in digital

Table 1. Project themes and questions.

Definition	What is the "family archive"? What does it contain and why? Is this a useful term to apply to the present day?
Function	What messages about family identity do these materials convey? How do families emotionally engage with the objects in their archives, and the histories associated with them?
Ownership	Who owns/curates archival material in families, and how? Who decides what is included and excluded? Do archives exist in one place, or can they be a virtual concept, with contents spread across time and space? How have digital technologies affected ideas of ownership?
Context	How do families integrate their histories with wider historical narratives (e.g., wars, class struggles, major events) and group identity, and collective or cultural memory? How do they use archives to negotiate their place in, and relationship with, the wider world?

formats. Terms such as "crowdsourcing", "citizen curators", and "citizen archivists" have gained currency as professional curators and archivists invite the public to tag historical images and documents, upload digital images, transcribe records, and select material for display (e.g., Cox 2009; Owens 2013; Ride 2013; United States of America, National Archives, n.d.). Whilst undoubtedly valuable for breaking down traditional distinctions between the authorial expert and the public as consumers of knowledge, such projects frequently use public input to add value to national, public collections held by institutions; the "citizen archivist" exists only at the invitation of the professionals. However, rarely, if ever, is the language of "citizen curation/archiving" and the specialist knowledge it implies applied to the autonomous practice of amassing personal or family archives; consequently, the impact of familial archiving practices and forms on institutional archives is poorly understood. By increasing the use of their collections and taking on the role of disseminators of guidance about managing and recognizing the significance of "unmanaged" family archives, these organizations can help ensure their continuing relevance to a wider audience.

However, a consideration of contemporary attitudes to personal – specifically family – histories also feeds into a number of complex issues faced by museums and archives. Increased pressure to collect, which connects museums and archives to the contemporary world events, for example, rapid response collecting, can be seen alongside the need for sustainable collecting practices, as it becomes clear that organizations cannot continue to collect at past rates (Merriman 2004). These competing demands arguably place considerable pressure on institutions and their resources (Kursch 2013; Grant 2010); tricky decisions between what is brought into the museum or archive and what is potentially deaccessioned or disposed of are inevitable. The solution is not that museums and archives should indiscriminately collect more of this "behind the scenes" heritage, but that they should consider how best to help others understand the significance and value of what they have.

In what follows, the approach to exploring the idea of a family archive in contemporary society, is outlined based on the themes definition, function, ownership and context of a family archive, using past studies to highlight that there is more understanding of these themes as applied to historical contexts than of contemporary society. The paper then moves on to introduce the method employed to access opinions on these themes before presenting an overview of the focus group findings and offering some concluding thoughts on what these findings reveal about curated personal possessions, identity and the relationship between public and personal heritage.

The Family Archive – Understanding Family Identity Through Material Possessions

A number of associations and definitions were implicit in the research, which are worthy of brief discussion here. For example, it is clear that the study of families and their belongings is intrinsically connected to the study of the domestic space and the "home" environment (see, for example, Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zúñiga 1999; Miller 2008, 2001). However, restricting an understanding of the location of the "family archive" to the home might in turn restrict the concept of what the family archive is, and how it functions in the present day. Instead, the study expanded the notions of "home" with an

understanding that the "symbolic environment" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's 1981, xi) of the household could extend beyond the traditional four walls of the home into the surrounding neighborhood and beyond.

The term "family" is also complex, carrying "enormous ideological power" (Pearce 1998a, 96), and clarity was needed about how this term was used within the current research. This research therefore uses a broad definition of "family" which aligns with our more fluid understanding of "home"; we understand the term "family" to refer to any grouping of people with a shared bond or identity, whether as friends, housemates or blood relatives, living in the same space or geographically dispersed. In practical terms, the focus group participants were allowed to define for themselves the referents of the terms family and family archive.

Definition and Scope of a Family Archive

Possibly the most crucial starting point for this study is whether a distinct grouping of objects called a "family archive" can be defined at all. "Archive" as a term is itself fluid and open to interpretation (see Bradley 1999); does the family archive as a concept exist, and is it a useful idea for understanding the relationship between families, identity and material possessions?

The term "family archive" was found in the academic literature; however, perhaps not surprisingly, it usually referred to studies of textual, documentary, paper-based archives belonging to specific families (see, for example, Barrett and Stallybrass 2013; Rokahr 2003; Diskin 1979). Some authors do include material possessions such as quilts, toys and even plants when discussing records of a family's past (although not necessarily using the term "family archive"; see for example Evans 2012, Pearce 1998a, 1998b). The project hypothesis is that just as Bastian (2013) shows the range of different forms a public archive can take, a family's archive also extends far beyond the textual and documentary. For example, when discussing the objects retained by parents recording their children's development, Stevens et al. (2003) highlight the importance of photographs but suggest that the majority of this family archive is actually other types of object which have the potential to be the "least expressive to outsiders and the most expressive to parents" (Stevens et al. 2003, 211), thus implying that a family's archive, particularly the non-textual items, may require more interpretation in order to be meaningful to others. This also suggests that a family archive may be largely intangible with its meaning held between specific individuals. For Shore (2009) family property includes family memories, which is taken to mean joint autobiographical memory that affects the individual memories of each family member. It is via these memories, expressed partly through joint property, that a family remains a distinctive entity. As such, the top-down approach of seeing family archives as a (poor) imitation of formal archives, primarily constituting documents is resisted. Instead, the study takes a "bottom up" approach, which engages with contemporary discussions of intangible heritage and embraces the seemingly random and unstructured nature of the family archive on its own terms.

The idea of a family archive raises questions about whether such an assemblage is a consciously amassed, or curated, collection. Definitions of what makes a collection, what constitutes the practice of collecting and who a collector is (an individual, a group, an institution) vary greatly, from the idea that collecting is the epitome of

consumption (Belk 1995), to the notion that as a process collecting is actually anti-materialistic and decommoditizing (Appadurai 1986). Belk (1998, 67) usefully defines collecting as "the process of actively, selectively and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use". Using this definition and given a bottom-up approach, a family archive is not necessarily considered to be a typical collection, since its growth may be more fluid, informal and ad-hoc instead of a deliberate and "active" process of acquisition and curation. Whether a family archive can be considered a "collection" or not is ultimately a highly subjective and dynamic judgement made by diverse actors.

Function and Purpose

What does a "family archive" do and what is it for? Studies have shown that certainly in the public sphere, the creation of archives and collections serves a number of different purposes: symbolic value, the granting of legitimacy and authenticity to those represented in the archive, and invisibility to those who are not, whether as a deliberate or subconscious act (see for example Kaplan 2000). However, little is known about whether these functions also apply to the family archive, although studies such as Miller (2008) suggest that it can.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) revealed that objects are extremely powerful in the shaping of identity with a specific focus on the future. They argue that objects are an integral part of the process through which people construct meanings, to the extent that objects "create the ultimate goals of one's existence" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, xi). Miller echoes this position when he suggests, "objects make people" (2010, 53). Connecting to the past via family genealogy is also thought to have implications for the construction of individual identity. Basu (2004) in his study of Orkney emphasizes the continuity, stability, sense of security and distinctiveness that a sense of history can provide for individual members. Other scholars have pointed to increasingly popular hobby of family history research as creating meaning in one's life and sense of self (Santos and Yan 2010; Noakes 2017). The objects held in family archives can thus potentially play a role in family continuity as they are preserved and passed down through the generations.

The importance of material possessions in terms of *what* people collect formed the focus of Susan Pearce's "Contemporary Collecting in Britain Survey" (see Pearce 1998a, 1998b). Pearce's work is particularly important for this study because of the attention that is paid to the home and the family as a sphere of collecting activity. Pearce sees the family and its relation to material culture as a significant site for the construction of heritage: "the creation of material identity is crucial to a family's sense of wellbeing" (1998b, 86). The idea of the family archive being connected to the "health" of a family is also highlighted by Rosenberg (2011) who suggests that as well as a family archive offering historians key source material for global or national events, at a more intimate level the rediscovery of an archive of letters belonging to a relative who died in the Holocaust had the effect of forging on-going familial, social and interpersonal relationships.

Ownership

Ownership of the archive also appeared as a key theme from an examination of the literature. For example, others previously touched upon the relationship between family

possessions and gender an important issue to explore further, particularly in terms of who "owned", "took charge of" or curated family possessions. Historical studies suggest that women are expected to play a particular role in the curation of family history. For example, Evans's (2012) study of memory and material culture in colonial Australia found that where preservation of family histories involved the safeguarding of forms of material objects, the type of object determined whether the caretaker was male or female. Women were often linked to the handing down of objects which are associated with the construction and sharing of family trees, such as diaries and journals, and objects of lower economic value usually kept in the home, suggesting that "objects have played an important part in the construction of genealogies by women" (Evans 2012, 208; see also Higgs and Radosh 2013 on quilts). By contrast, men appeared to be linked more with objects of higher economic value. A slightly more nuanced view emerges from a historical study of "Family books" in early modern English household (Leong 2013). "Family books" are written collections of family knowledge including notes and medical recipes, which are handed down through the family. Leong argues that rather than being exclusively female products, these books were collaborative endeavors, and that the transmission of family knowledge in this form involved both men and women.

In family history practice today, relating to the First World War particularly, Noakes (2017) argues that (older) women take on a particularly important role in relating to and continuing the emotional history and impact of the legacy. In this way, women have taken on a more active role in shaping the way in which both personal histories and an international conflict are used and shaped for present and future generations, in a form of "postmemory" (also see Hirsch 1997, 2008). Pearce (1998b) also observes a difference in the way that men and women relate to objects and their significance within a family context. She suggests that when exploring the meaning of objects, "it is clear that notions of 'summing up the family' and 'holding memories' have less emotional significance for men than they do for women" (1998b, 93). She hypothesized that for men the passage of time produces significant objects but for women objects *are* the passage of time, suggesting different approaches to the construction of family memory between the genders. She saw prized possessions passed down the female line in a family, ultimately presenting the possibility that "that material culture is matrilineal" (1998b, 95). It is possible to criticize Pearce's conclusions as essentalizing what is doubtless a highly complex process, however, we were keen to understand whether this relationship present in the focus group discussions or, some years after Pearce's research whether these conclusions need to be rethought in a contemporary context.

Context

Finally, the function of the family archive is inextricably linked to the wider context in which it operates. A key goal of the project was to understand whether the possessions that form the "family archive" were interpreted by their owners as symbolic of broader historical or contemporary narratives. Far less research examines the relationship between the public and private through possessions in the domestic sphere. Some do, however; for example, Rosenberg's 2011 study of his relative's letters written during the Holocaust clearly relates a family story to wider historical events. However, he emphasizes the

historical significance of these letters, and does not explore how the letters and their subject matter influence his family's contemporary identity. As Hirsch (1997, 2008) describes, the processes of piecing together past memories, things and research as a form of postmemory is particularly common amongst families affected by the Holocaust. Noakes (2017) and Wallis (2015) have similarly noted that one of the key forms of marking the centenary of First World War has been through family history practice.

Other recent publications have also started to pave a role for family histories contextualized in wider social and cultural change. Alison Light's (2015) publication of her family history, for example, helps us to see the various connection between family history and the wider social context, such as Victorian developments in the treatment of mania or the shifting nature of the navy. She carefully highlights the particular and unique nature of each and every individual story, and the power of personal research as "family history humanizes" (2015, xxii). Similarly, Richard Benson's *The Valley* (2015) uses his family history in the Dearne Valley and beyond to tell a powerful history of "ordinary" people, detailing means of working-class survival in the face of poverty and the practical and emotional impact of the miners' strikes and the dismantling of the coal industry in the region. How were national and local narratives integrated into the particular stories of the family archive in our focus groups? What relationship exists between personal heritage and heritage at much larger social scales?

The Focus Groups

The methodology selected for this study was focus groups, a popular methodology across a range of disciplines (Wilkinson 1998). Focus groups, rather than interviews, were considered most appropriate as they allow and encourage interaction between participants (Litosseliti 2003). The aim was to elicit participants' shared understandings, opinions and views on the set of themes that had emerged from our historical case studies and review of the literature. The focus group format is well suited to this initial exploration and hypothesis generation stage of a research project.

The focus groups were held in three different locations in England. The precise locations are withheld here to maintain participant anonymity, however, there were similarities between the locations in terms of socio-economic context, a strong regional identity, and a recent industrial past. To organize the focus groups, we partnered with local cultural or community organizations who recruited participants via their own networks and provided an appropriate space in which to hold the focus groups. The partners had strong connections to local resident groups in each location, and felt that the "Family Archive" project aligned well with their own organizational interests and priorities, ensuring that the project was of mutual benefit.

The focus groups were designed to be exploratory, and did not seek to recruit particular kinds of participants in terms of specific demographic variables, age, gender or other relevant indicators. The participants (8-10 in each group) were self-selecting and the majority of the focus group participants already had an interest in family history, local history, museums and archives. The participants also held varying positions within the "family". We did not assume the participants were able to speak on behalf of their "family group" about the relationship between family possessions and identity but would talk from their own experience.

A limited amount of demographic information from the participants was collected at the start of the focus group (gender, age, highest level of education, ethnicity). The composition of the groups was fairly equally split in terms of gender. The majority of the participants were over sixty, with the next largest group of participants under thirty. In terms of education and ethnicity, the majority of participants who chose to answer this question identified with being white British or gave their ethnicity as "Yorkshire". Finally over a third of those who responded had a university education. Further research into specific communities and groups within Britain would be valuable.

While the project is consonant with genealogy or family history research, family archives are distinct from this practice. Researching family genealogy has become a global pastime, popularized by popular television programmes such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* raising the profile of repositories such as museums and archives (Barratt 2009; Cohen 2013). As such, family history and popular genealogy are practices, which may "feed" the family archive. Although some of the participants mentioned an interest in family history, the words "family history" or "genealogy" were not used in participant recruitment materials or in the focus group questions, in order not to close down or direct the discussions.

The project team designed a list of guiding questions in advance (See Table 1). Although there was flexibility to take the discussions in different directions, as is characteristic of focus group methodology (Barbour and Kitzinger 1998), each session thus covered broadly similar topics. The questions used related to our overarching research questions about the definition, function, ownership and context of a "family archive". Participants gave their informed consent prior to the start of the focus group; each group was recorded and transcribed. A thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts based once more on the core themes of definition, function, ownership and context. Each transcript was first analyzed by one member of the research team and then circulated around the other team members in order to check that there was agreement and themes were applied consistently. This way a "reflexive dialogue" (Braun and Clarke 2006, 82) was maintained between team members and the focus group data.

Exploring the Family Archive: What Is a Family Archive?

The majority of the focus group participants talked with ease about an extensive range of objects and documents they owned which had a connection with past and present friends and family members. These objects included, as we had anticipated, items such as photographs, certificates, books, letters and recipes, but also included items such as candlesticks, wine glasses, medals, jewelry, souvenirs and other "objects":

> A letter from my dad. Uh, when he was in India. It was, he sent me a Christmas card and uh sorry um … aerogramme. (Participant, FG2)

and:

> … quite weirdly they've [my parents] kept like different haircuts throughout my life … there's bits of hair in envelopes, like, that my mum's got in a cupboard […] and it's all like plaited and it's labelled. (Participant, FG1)

Some categories of object were very frequently mentioned across different focus groups; photographs and documents associated with different life stages such as birth, death and

marriage certificates were the most common. Their prominence reaffirmed the idea that family possessions often include "legitimised" items from the moments where an individual's life comes into contact with the formality of state structures, such as birth and death, and become visible in that sphere by being officially recorded. It was clear that some items such as these "life-stage documents" had been very deliberately gathered and saved by a family member, while others entered a family's collective archive more haphazardly and perhaps not even consciously.

Our focus groups all agreed that material possessions of all kinds, including often fairly mundane objects, were used to narrate and recall stories and memories, as in this example:

> I've got me dad's till … it is, basically is a wooden box with a drawer … But I remember it so vividly from when … because I used to help serve in the shop … from when we were younger. (Participant, FG3)

However, whether our focus group participants would consciously see this collection of possessions as an "archive" of their family history, using this specific label, was certainly open to debate. Some participants could not relate this term to the family-related items that they, or other family members, had accumulated. This was partly because of the participants' prior conceptual associations with the term "archive", which they viewed as more official than an individual or a family's private collections. For example, one participant said:

> You usually think of archives as belonging to somebody else. And although you keep things belonging to your family – um mementoes, and photographs … you – don't consider them as an archive. (Participant, FG1)

Similarly, another participant explained:

> … in our family I don't think anybody consciously … thought about keeping an archive. The only thing we've got really is just photographs in a box somewhere. (Participant, FG2)

However, as discussions progressed during one of the focus groups, one participant reflected more on the definition of archive and what it meant for him:

> I never really thought of family archives other than the things you might see on TV or something like specific objects being handed down. And then I started thinking about it … there was all kinds of different things which I probably could consider … archives. (Participant, FG 1)

He was clearly coming to the conclusion that this term was more relevant to his own context than he had previously thought, and was not alone in this realization in the course of the discussion. However, for others there was a sense that in order for something to be part of an "archive" the objects would need to have an importance beyond a single individual:

> Researcher: Do you think they could be archive items? Would you consider them as part of your family archive?
>
> Participant: Not to anyone else. Not to anyone else.
>
> (Participant, FG 1)

Again, we see the sense that the term "archive" excludes the domestic space and the objects and documents amassed by participants; the perceived significance of those collections was felt only by the participants or their close relatives. Not all participants shared this view; for example, one participant was aware that the objects in his family archive could be used to talk about wider social issues such as poverty:

> I've got some stuff in my office which is very old … it's just overwhelming in its power … it's um warrants for the arrest of absconding paupers … and when you read them, first they're really funny and then it's oh my god these are horrific. And it reads … [she] did abscond from the said poor house taking with her cardigan, her dress, one pair of bloomers … shoes … and they got two months each hard labour for this. (Participant, FG1)

However, on balance participants generally took the view that that their possessions and the possessions that had been given or left to them by family and friends would not be of much interest to others and therefore did not form an "archive." There was a general lack of understanding of the relevance, significance and specialness of the participants' own personal history as conveyed by more quotidian objects. For example, one participant struggled to identify certificates as heirlooms, probably because they are not seen as "valuable" in an economic sense:

> I've got no heirlooms, but I've got a certificate, birth certificates. Wedding certificate and death certificate. (Participant, FG2)

This response parallels how many of the focus group participants viewed the value of their own family possessions, and the challenge of identifying their own collections as having the same (not necessarily financial) value as a publicly-held collection. Nearly all of our participants had a collection of material possessions that "described," "recorded" or "documented" family history or were associated with past and present family members, even if they did not conceptualize this as an "archive". Not all of the participants viewed their own family specific collections as holding the same level of significance as a publicly significant collection of historic documents and records. Yet if we accept that an official archive/museum collection and a family archive are both partial assemblages, reflecting only some "aspects" of the past, more similarities exist between these two types of collections than we might first assume. Participants recognized that the process of forming a family archive, like a museum collection or public archive, was a selective one, based on a process of decision-making:

> … there's a tendency to try and keep everything. So you have to be careful … history is constantly refined isn't it? (Participant, FG1)

> … there's an element [of] curating isn't there? That says we need to find what really is relevant … . (Participant, FG1)

These are important insights into how an archive in the domestic sphere is assembled. They recognize that we are all engaged in the process of making and remaking history, and that the stories and histories we choose to remember via our personal possessions are always selective. In a constant and on-going process, some memories are lost while others are prioritized. The participants suggested they felt that, within the domestic sphere, this process is random and haphazard and less deliberate. However, this overstates the sense of logic behind the development of public archives and collections, and underplays the

logic and systematic intentions behind the way some family archives have been amassed. For example, some of the focus group participants talked about the family archive as a process of piecing together a family history which involved specific planned steps that we might equate with doing formal research, such as using "official" archives and museums, searching online resources, and exchanging information with family members:

> … I have borrowed … photographs from other family members … and so on when we've got together next, because they were interested in family history too. They wanted to know … about our shared ancestors … and exchanged stories and quotes, which I've used as well. (Participant, FG3)

The definitions of the family archive that emerged from the focus group discussions were thus complex, multiple and often constructed against a very specific sense of "other," or what they were not – a standard which they did not meet. Participants highlighted a wide range of types of items that were important to them and their relatives and friends. But they also played down the significance of these items, by referring to both a sense of financial value – these were not valuable "heirlooms" that might belong to wealthier families – and a sense of official order – these were not the careful and systematic collections of a state or institution. Yet by understanding the similarities between families' collections and formal museum and archive collections, and viewing their value on its own terms, it is clear that objects are highly significant in personal history and play a special role in creating and transmitting family identity.

Where Is the Family Archive?

Conversations about what a family archive is and what it contains led to discussions about where a family archive resides. This in turn raised considerations about the nature of the "archive". Is it tangible or intangible? Is the archive the collection of physical objects? Or does it encompass the memories associated with these objects? One participant said:

> We have got a family archive, it lurks in the loft … There are two family archives. One lurks in the head of various people. (Participant, FG1)

For this participant, an archive had distinct tangible and intangible forms, which were located in different places. Another participant recognized that an archive goes beyond the physical:

> We still do have archives it's just … the archive is different, it's not always physical … it's just different ways of us perceiving what the archives are. (Participant, FG1)

For another participant, the archive was intangible and the idea that intangible stories should be passed on to others was of primary importance. However, to do this effectively, the tangible object that related to the story or memory was required; therefore the story "belonged" to a physical object:

> … it's down to us now to make sort of our children, their children, you know, pass on the stories that belong to these items. Because if you didn't … you wouldn't have a story that it connects to, to pass it on. (Participant, FG2)

Participants also recognized with some unease that the value of objects shifts depending on the context of interpretation and who is interpreting them. A specific story could only

be "attached" to an object when there was a person there who could recall this story, otherwise the object remained silent:

> … if I suddenly go, then somebody has to sort it all out, they won't know really what the significance is, and what circumstances letters were written … people die with boxes and boxes of photographs in their shoe boxes … and nobody knows who they are or where they were. (Participant, FG1)

Some participants felt concern that not everyone would see the same significance in the objects as they did:

> … these are the things about the family archives, the precious sort of things like, you know, little things that to other people they'd probably give them away. (Participant, FG2)

The growth of digital archiving also prompted thoughts around what a family archive may increasingly look like. For example, one participant suggested that passing down oral histories without the need for physical objects would become more important as our daily lives are recorded more and more in the "incomplete" digital world:

> … that will be different in the future because people won't have all our texts or all our emails to people. Whereas … all my family have some letters that my grandparents sent and some cards and birthday cards and things … so there won't be so much physical stuff … and so, I think maybe we'll go back to relying, again, more on passing down oral kind of histories. (Participant, FG1)

There was an anxiety about what will be preserved and handed down to future generations in the digital age, and a concern that digital records would be lost or inaccessible. Once again, the parallels with professional archival practices are evident, as "future-proofing" a digital archive is a concern for both public and domestic spheres (see Marshall 2008a, 2008b).

The tension around the perceived importance of physical things and having an "accurate" understanding of what these things meant was also a clear concern. On one hand, the participants emphasized the need for physical objects in order to pass on memories and understand family history. For example, one participant felt that a lack of "stuff" left a huge gap in knowledge:

> From my point of view, it's thinking about the past, my family. Thinking about what hasn't actually come down … the stuff that's gone forever. That's really frightening. (Participant, FG1)

But on the other hand, many participants considered "stuff" to be a burden on the family members who will inherit it, and felt that arranging for possessions to be passed down to the next generation was almost too difficult to contemplate:

> What do you give t'younger people? What do you give them when you've gone? I'm just gonna leave it like me aunt. All … in t'house. And let 'em sort it out themself … . (Participant, FG3)

As such, the concerns and comments of the focus group participants echoed many debates amongst professionals around archives: that there was a limit to how much "stuff" could be preserved, that the provenance of objects could get lost, and that the new digital age was causing as many problems as solutions for those keen to preserve a particular history. The fact that the same issues surfaced in discussion emphasizes the

blurred boundary between "managed" and "unmanaged" archives, and the parallel challenges facing them both.

To Whom Does the Family Archive Belong?

Discussions around the importance of family history and passing on material possessions also opened a window onto other anxieties some focus group members experienced, which included the differences between the older and younger generations. There was a tendency amongst the older participants to lament a perceived lack of interest in family history among younger generations:

> But I think you mention it to younger people and then you say 'find out as much as you can while you can'. But they're generally not too interested; you know … it's hard. (Participant, FG3)

However, some of the younger focus group participants challenged this opinion. They suggested that they did not have a lack of interest in family history, but that the generation at the top of the family tree took control of family history and the family archive, and that this duty was reserved for them. In a way, this allocation of responsibility excluded them from the process of developing the family archive. For example, concerning accumulated family "stuff", one participant mentioned:

> I don't have custody of it yet. (Participant, FG1)

The key word in the above quotation is "yet": it implies that that ownership of the family archive and the responsibility for it passes down the generations, and that the participant will eventually have custody of the items. This process was corroborated by other participants:

> … you're the generation that will take over from your parents and you become the top of the tree … and it's this funny place that when your parents die and suddenly you become the person who's at the top there … and so you need to pick these things up. (Participant, FG1)

This quotation reveals that care of and interest in family possessions is delegated to specific people at specific times, perhaps after the death of someone at the top of the family tree. However, there is a more limited understanding of how this process works conceptually within the framework of a family archive. As one person dies, how does the amalgamation of other people's possessions with our own impact upon our sense of family identity? Are new stories integrated into existing ones as the generation now at the top of the family tree takes over the "archive"? What stages does this process go through?

It was difficult to say with certainty whether the participants felt that the family archive and its associated responsibilities was gender specific as, for example, seen in Pearce (1998b) discussed earlier. However, there were hints that despite over half of the focus group participants being male, women played a significant role in holding and curating the "family archive" and having an interest in family history. For example, a female member of the focus groups mentioned:

> In my family, it's my mum who's interested in the history of her family and my dad doesn't really care. Well, I think he does [care] but he doesn't really have custody of the information because his sisters both have all the stuff … But it seems to be more of a female thing …

people kind of keeping things for posterity. And I think maybe he just hasn't really done that himself very much for his own photos. (Participant, FG1)

A male focus group member confirmed after hearing this that if he wanted to know anything about his family history, he would ask female family members as: " … I don't think the male members were really bothered" (Participant, FG1). It appears that whilst both men and women own family archive objects, may have an interest in curating these, and are engaged in family history, the specific emotional work of carrying on family knowledge, stories, memories and postmemories is designated as a task for women. Although it is not possible to draw any conclusions from this exchange alone, it is a relationship worth exploring further in the future. It is unclear whether men have tended to shy away from this role or whether women have taken custody of items without extensive discussion, although it is likely to depend considerably on each family's context and its emotional dynamics.

Concluding Comments: We Are What We Keep

The themes that arose from the three focus groups are just the tip of the iceberg for this wide-ranging topic. However, the discussions structured around the definition, function, ownership and context of a "family archive" bring attention to the complex and problematic role of material possessions in creating a sense of a family's past and contemporary identity. For the participants, these family-related objects played a certain role of varying degrees of importance in their lives, and this is where these focus groups are most eloquent: they speak to the individual, our present understanding of self, our anxieties about contemporary society and our vision of the future. "Self" may be very difficult to disentangle from "family", but discussions about family and material possessions come from a self-led perspective. In their interpretations of objects, participants reinforced the very real connection between material possessions and how we construct a sense of who we are, but as Bradley (1999, 119) suggests, "what we find in the archive is ourselves". Ultimately the experience of the archive is a personal one regardless of the wider history the archive pertains to.

Official and unofficial heritage, public and private archives and the blurring of boundaries between these spheres were also considered. The focus groups helped explore how families act as "curators" of their own personal possessions, how their actions generate and transmit a distinct family identity across generations, and the potential impact this behavior has for wider cultural institutions. Overall, there are significant similarities between archiving practices in the public and the private spheres, even if preconceptions of how to define an archive initially obscure them. There is clearly a great deal of expertise and experience in those who handle "unmanaged" heritage, regardless of whether the language of museums and archiving is used to describe those practices. This is an area of serious potential for collaboration and exchange, for professional historians, archivists and museum professionals and for family historians.

The family archive tended to be undervalued by the focus group participants because of its lower economic value and perceived lower cultural value. Yet the significance of individual objects for family narrative functions as a site of contested meaning in the same way as controversial objects in major museum collections, such as the Parthenon marbles, do. These findings should encourage museum and archive professionals to

reconsider their role in relationship to the private family archive, in helping citizen curators understand their own holdings, not just those in public collections, and the processes through which those holdings are assembled, ensuring practices of collaboration are meeting the needs of those involved as well as the institution itself. The results also suggest reclaiming the term "archive" for the home context, or certainly broadening an understanding of what the term "archive" encompasses and the different values associated with them. This would involve the promotion of the cultural value, significance and meaning of the everyday objects, possessions and practices that reside beyond the formal walls of the official public archival institutions. For example, citizen curator initiatives tend to be where museums and archives invite people to add meaning to existing collections, but whether these initiatives have helped members of the general public view their own "archives" as something worth "curating" is still unknown. This may point to a subconscious message that some types of object or record, i.e., those in public collections, are more significant and worthy of preservation than objects located in other spheres, rather than highlighting that questions of value are context specific and dynamic.

There are also other parallels between the public and private domains that our research shed light on, particularly responses to the accumulation of "stuff" and the associated responsibility of caring for it. In public collections, this is reflected in the sustainable collecting debates referred to at the start of this article, and in the family context anxieties cluster around possessions becoming burdensome for the next generation or losing their meaning, as generations are lost. These concerns are of course not identical, with, for example, most public museums and archives operating within professional codes of practice governing collecting and disposal. However, there are definite similarities, which relate back to the need to understand the significance of these objects in order to know what is most appropriate to keep and what could potentially be disposed of. Further collaboration and exchange of knowledge between the public and domestic spheres, which is valued equally could once again prove to be mutually beneficial (see for example King and Hammett 2018, on work undertaken with family historians as part of the "Living with Dying" project, and King and Hammett, forthcoming). The accessibility and ease of use of digital platforms is an obvious area to focus on in order to overcome these issues, while acknowledging that the digital raises its own set of challenges and anxieties for both museums and archives and the "family archive" as indicated in the discussion above.

Our final point emphasises the need for more work around the significance of family possessions. For example, the guided questions touched on some significant issues such as gender and poverty but were not able to consider the impact of class, ethnicity or geography on understandings of family identity in detail. Likewise the relationship between national and global events such as the world wars and the accumulation of family possessions and stories that are told as part of individual family narratives warrant future research. As suggested above, research in this area could have far reaching impacts, feeding into both public and home contexts. These events are extremely important for some families from the "types" of object that are held in family archives, such as medals and military records. However, very little is known about the uses that these items play in the narratives that shape family identity – indicating, perhaps, that understanding

the relationship family narratives and wider national or global narratives requires a more in-depth methodology.

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