“Tell Something About the Pictures”: The Content and the Process of Autobiographical Work Among Scrapbookers

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Viewing the popular process of making “scrapbooks” as a particular type of autobiographical occasion, I analyze interviews with scrapbookers and others who make up the scrapbooker’s community, including industry workers and biographical others (i.e., family and friends). By considering scrapbooks within the autobiographical community in which they are created, I am able to scrutinize the structure of the narratives they contain, the role of the audience in their creation, and the emergence of norms of remembrance among scrapbookers. The narratives recorded in scrapbooks emerge from the bottom up and suggest that scrapbooking is a way to demonstrate the biographical stability necessary to craft an authenticity narrative. Further, I explore how scrapbookers “do autobiography” by uncovering their decision-making process regarding what is worth memorializing. Scrapbookers work through a mnemonic checklist assessing special events and everyday life for its “scrapworthiness.” This paper’s contribution centers on describing the process and the content of these atypical autobiographical occasions.

Keywords: autobiographical occasions, autobiographical community, scrapbook, norms of remembrance, narrative

INTRODUCTION

In this inquiry on autobiographical occasions, I examine the broader, more durable community surrounding the autobiographer, which influences the construction of the narrative and the process of autobiographical work. This research uses the practice of scrapbooking to illuminate how autobiographers (i.e., scrapbookers, scrappers, memory keepers, and hobbyists1) “reconstruct the memories that are put down on paper” (Zussman 1996:147). Scrapbooking involves arranging photographs, embellishments (e.g., stickers), memorabilia (e.g., ticket stubs), and journaling on archival paper and...
then laying out the page in an album. I argue that scrapbooking constitutes a distinct type of narrative because it exists within a particular type of autobiographical community which includes a particular constellation of others. These others include scrapbookers and their peers, the audiences for the scrapbooks, biographical others (i.e., family and friends), the other thought communities to which individual scrapers belong, and an industry devoted to teaching people how to scrapbook and, consequently, how to do autobiography. Moreover, scrapbookers constitute a thought community (Fleck 1979 [1935]; Zerubavel 1997) with a common perspective (see Shibutani 1955) and norms of interpreting everyday life as memorable or forgettable. Drawing on interviews with scrappers, biographical others, and industry workers, I show how the content and process of autobiographical work is socially grounded, produced, and consumed, thus extending DeGloma’s (2010, 2014) concept of autobiographical community.

THE CONTENT AND PROCESS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORK

Zussman (2000:5–6) originally conceptualized autobiographical occasions as those moments “which we are called on to reflect in systematic and extended ways on who we are and what we are.” For example, scholars have examined autobiographical occasions prompted by cosmetic surgery (Gimlin 2000), job loss (Ezzy 2000), high school reunions (Vinitsky-Seroussi 1998, 2000), parent education group participation (LaRossa and Sinha 2006), and false memory syndrome “retractors” (Davis 2000). Other scholars have examined the autobiographical occasions produced within specific thought communities, including the ill (Adamson 1997; Frank 2000), women in a self-defense program (De Welde 2003), participants in Codependents Anonymous (Irvine 2000), American economists (Reay 2007), HIV positive women (Leonard and Ellen 2008), post-Holocaust genealogists (Stein 2009), and awakeners (DeGloma 2010, 2014).

In contrast, “atypical autobiographical occasions” (e.g., a photograph album) have a similar purpose (i.e., offering an account of one’s life), yet they are voluntary (Zussman 2006). Likewise, scrapbooks tend to emerge from the bottom up (see Zussman 2012). Scrapbooks are further distinguished as an autobiographical form because they exist within a $1.44 billion scrapbooking industry (Domine 2011) “devoted to telling people how to do [auto]biography” (LaRossa and Sinha 2006:434).² People could create scrapbooks without the industry and have for centuries (Ott, Tucker, and Buckler 2006), because as Demos (2006:80) argues, scrapbooking “does not have clearly defined tasks or standards.” The strength of the industry, however, depends on memory keepers relying on it to define “tasks or standards.”

Modern scrapbooking emerged to preserve a family’s history and the albums are promoted as family heirlooms (see Demos 2006). The industry supports this goal through emphasizing the exclusive use of archival materials in the albums and encouraging hobbyists to write down the story (i.e., journaling) that goes along with the photographs and ephemera so that the stories can be understood in the absence
of the scrapbook’s creator. Therefore, scrapbooks are a distinct autobiographic form lying somewhere between face-to-face interaction (Goffman 1959) with a visible and active audience and Internet homepages with an invisible and less active audience (Walker 2000). This research explores the scrapbooks’ audience and their interpretations of the albums. Audience involvement, however, is rarely straightforward (Demos 2006). For instance, Demos (2006) finds that women scrapbookers note that their husbands and children are equally interested in seeing how their wife or mother spent her time away from the family as they are interested in the stories the albums hold — suggesting that what the scrapbooker finds important (e.g., the stories) is not viewed with the same level of importance as potential audience members.

Other studies of scrapbooking have focused on how memory keepers reproduce gender roles and normative family narratives through the hobby (Christensen 2011; Demos 2006; Downs 2006; Goodsell and Seiter 2011) and the meaning of a crafting stash for handcrafters (including scrapbookers) (Stalp and Winge 2008:205). Today, this thought community continues to emphasize creating family keepsakes, while also promoting scrapbooking as artistic, therapeutic, and fun. Importantly, the content of many albums remains family-centered but the process of scrapbooking is mostly for the memory keeper. For example, creating albums with other people outside the home (i.e., attending a crop) is a means for women to make time for themselves away from the family (Demos 2006).3

I broaden the scholarship on autobiographical occasions and scrapbooking through the inclusion of the perspective of biographical others. Biographical others consist mainly of family and friends — significant others as opposed to the “chorus” (see Berger and Luckmann 1966:151). They serve as the subject matter, supporting characters in the scrapbook, and the audience.

Biographical others, which include but are not limited to industry workers and scrapbooking peers, serve as an autobiographical community. I describe this autobiographical community, which mnemonically socializes a scrapper into the practice of autobiographical work. DeGloma (2010, 2014) finds that autobiographic storytellers use their narratives to move in and out of autobiographical communities, which are focused on specific types of narratives (e.g., awakenings). I modify this concept of autobiographical community to describe the larger group beyond the storyteller (i.e., scrapper) that mnemonically socializes the storyteller. It is through mnemonic socialization that one learns what should be remembered and how it should be commemorated (i.e., norms of remembrance) (Zerubavel 2003). Autobiographic work involved “framing” memories as scrapworthy implying other memories could be discarded or ignored (see Zerubavel 1991, 1997, 2006). Thus, I illuminate the content of the resulting scrapbooks.

The voluntariness of scrapbooking gives participants a certain narrative freedom, which refers to “the ability to tell stories about ourselves [and biographical others] in the ways we want” (Zussman 2012:808). Scrapbookers can choose which stories or “biographical accounts” they tell and endow with meaning. Ezzy (2000:123) explains that “[b]iographical accounts are rhetorical constructions, designed to convince the
listener of a particular understanding of events. As such, events and issues are selectively recounted and arranged to form the account as a whole.” Furthermore, the scrapbook industry intends for scrapbooks to eventually be viewed in the absence of their creator, making it difficult for the audience to “verify misrepresentations and fabrications” (Walker 2000:100). Scrapbooks should be understood as a series of selectively chosen biographical accounts contributing to a whole narrative of a life, event, or family.

Finally, my research examines how scappers are linked together as a thought community united by their (unprompted) autobiographical method, rather than by other statuses (i.e., illness, profession) prompting the narrative. This research contributes to the literature on autobiography through an analysis of an atypical autobiographical occasion grounded within a larger autobiographical community (i.e., industry workers, biographical others).

METHODS

I worked part-time in a scrapbook store for five years and began participating in the hobby approximately eight years prior to data collection. My insider status allowed me to understand the language used by respondents (see Zinn 1979) though I worked at feigning ignorance on scrapbooking (i.e., the “acceptable incompetent” [Lofland et al. 2006]).

I analyzed in-depth interviews with 38 scrapbookers, 11 scrapbook industry workers, and 10 biographical others. I used in-depth and photo-elicitation (Clark-Ibáñez 2004; Harper 2003) interviewing techniques with memory keepers and biographical others while viewing key informant’s albums. The photo-elicitation interviews were necessary to extract any oral narrative accompanying a layout (i.e., scrapbook page) and to uncover the decision-making regarding the content of the layout and the process of scrapbooking. I further developed a sociological understanding of (auto)biographical work (see Holstein and Gubrium 2007:345) through interviewing scappers and biographical others regarding the albums and their creation.

I asked respondents to select typical and atypical layouts for us to examine during our interview. I left the words atypical and typical open to interpretation and explained to respondents that “they mean whatever you want them to mean.” Most respondents showed me layouts without identifying them as typical or atypical. As we discussed their layouts, I also questioned whether a layout was typical or not. Respondents usually agreed with my assessment. With each layout, I asked my respondent questions such as “what is going on in this page” (i.e., content) and “why did you choose to include this item or photo” (i.e., process)? Each scrapbooker shared an average of 40 layouts during our interview. I photographed each layout and embedded the images in my interview transcripts for analysis. I assessed how effectively scappers communicated a complete narrative by using the same layouts during my photo-elicitation interviews with biographical others.
Women have historically played a primary role in maintaining family histories (i.e., kin work) (see di Leonardo 1987) and women have long dominated scrapbooking as hobbyists and industry workers. Earlier research on the hobby supported this finding and relied on samples of mostly white married mothers who scrapbook (see Demos 2006; Downs 2006; Goodsell and Seiter 2011; Stalp and Winge 2008). However, my experience as an industry worker challenged this perspective as I had interactions with memory keepers that were men; gay, lesbian, or bisexual; and of color. I used purposive sampling to reach these under-researched subpopulations of hobbyists and my resulting sample included men ($N = 6$); gays, lesbians, or bisexuals ($N = 10$); and scrapbookers of color ($N = 7$) (four respondents fit more than one of these categories). Importantly, my selection of a diverse sample strengthens support for whether scrapbookers coalesce as a thought community of scrapbookers rather than a more general thought community of mothers or wives who also scrapbook.

I sought Latter-day Saints (LDS; $N = 8$) scrapbookers because Mormon practices of researching (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2010a) and keeping family histories (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2010b) contributed to the growth of the hobby as an industry. Today, the LDS influence (and a broader conservative Christian influence) can be observed through the ways in which scrapbooking companies operate (e.g., closed on Sundays) to the types of products that are produced (e.g., Christian-themed to the exclusion of Jewish- or Muslim-themed). Their inclusion in this study reflects their role in the industry.

I recruited participants by posting flyers in two scrapbook stores. In addition, my study was announced on the email lists of two additional stores and an email list for scrapbookers of color. I recruited direct sellers through their company’s website. I also posted flyers on community boards (e.g., coffee shops) and announced my study to my students (as did my colleagues). Further, I used purposive sampling to reach specific subpopulations. An LDS friend announced the study at her church. Store employees referred customers who fit particular demographics (e.g., of color, men, or gay or lesbian). Finally, my study was announced on a blog read by gays and lesbians to reach this demographic of hobbyists outside of stores.

Compared to other studies, my sample included fewer married or partnered respondents ($N = 25$) or parents ($N = 19$) and a larger share of employed respondents (19 worked full-time and eight worked part-time). My sample skewed toward the middle-class: only ten respondents reported household incomes of less than $39,000, of which, five were college students. Every respondent had at least some college education and most had a Bachelor’s degree ($N = 18$) or a graduate degree ($N = 11$). Respondents ranged in age from 21 to 67 (mean age of 37).

I interviewed ten biographical others referred to me by scrapbookers. Six biographical others were married or partnered to scrappers. The remaining biographical others included a friend, a school-aged son, a mother, and a mother-in-law to the scrapper. I also interviewed eleven people who had worked in this industry from 2 to 12 years (mean = 5.7). Most workers were married ($N = 8$) and had children ($N = 6$). One industry worker was black and the rest were white. Three worked
as full-time scrapbook business owners. Two part-time employees were full-time students and three had other full-time jobs. Most of the workers had Bachelor’s or graduate degrees and household incomes of at least $40,000 per year. Only the college students had less than a Bachelor’s degree and household incomes of less than $19,000 per year. Excluding the business owners, household incomes came from spouses, parents, or other employment.

I used grounded theory methods described by LaRossa (2005) to analyze my interview transcripts. I completed open, axial, and selective coding until I reached theoretical saturation. During open coding, “privacy” emerged as a continuous variable and was suggested by the indicator “hide those pictures … so that the average person wouldn’t even know that they’re there.” In this example, the respondent had hidden photos behind flaps that he knew were in the scrapbook, but the average person would not recognize the flap as something that could be lifted to reveal more photos. The content was made private (from the average person), yet remained only semi-private because it could be found if someone took the album apart or recognized the flaps as liftable. In contrast, another respondent maintained privacy by selectively sharing her scrapbooks. She posted layouts to her blog and said she “feels immensely restrained in what I can put on the blog because of course it’s open to whoever happens to be on the internet.” She shared most of her layouts online, but kept layouts indicating her lesbian relationship offline (i.e., private). Instead of hiding elements on a scrapbook page from audience members, she opted to keep some layouts completely private from her public blog. Scrapbooks may be public, semi-private, or completely private.

Axial coding involved identifying how the variables are related to one another. Privacy is related to other variables, including the scrapbooker’s sexual identity, employment status, and also the topic of the layout. This example suggests that privacy existed on a continuum. For instance, the lesbian scrapbooker did not hide her sexual identity in her scrapbooks, but she did limit how she shared her scrapbook on that topic private from her employer. The privateness of a scrapbook depended on the potential audience. Layouts posted online were public. Layouts not posted online could be considered semi-private — they could be selectively shared with an audience.

Selective coding involved focusing on one single variable (i.e., the core variable), which was central, occurred frequently in the data, related to other variables, implied a more general theory, moved the theory forward, and allowed for maximum variation (Glaser 1978; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1998). It is from this core variable that the core story is shaped (LaRossa 2005). The core variable was scrapworthy, that is, something was worth recording in the scrapbook. In the previous examples, both scrapbookers had stories that they felt were scrapworthy (otherwise they would not have scrapbooked them), however, they restricted the audience for some topics. A narrative may be deemed scrapworthy, but the narrative may be kept private, made semi-private, or made public.
SCARPBOOKING AS AUTOBIOGRAPHIC WORK
Defining the Tasks and Standards of Scrapbooking

Scrapbooking is not new, but its industry is. For the industry to exist, workers must convince memory keepers of their necessity and rules serve this need. Founded in 1987, Creative Memories was the original direct selling company that established “rules” of scrapbooking. According to respondents, the company introduced a “whole way of thinking” about memory keeping. Creative Memories tested their products for archival quality and used this testing to emphasize the superiority of their products over competitors. Creative Memories achieved success with this marketing strategy, yet hobbyists were critical of it, suggesting a tension with the “rules of scrapbooking.” A scrapper said some consultants would give you a hard time for bringing non-Creative Memories products (i.e., “contraband”) to a crop. She said “that’s ridiculous. Scrapbooking is supposed to be fun and it’s not that one product is better than the other; there are just too many choices to limit yourself in scrapbooking.” Most hobbyists agreed with the necessity of using archival materials, but resisted the forcefulness of the application of the rules by Creative Memories consultants. Indeed, since data collection closed, Creative Memories went through two bankruptcies. The company and its patents were sold and the brand was reintroduced in 2015. Their struggle has been a result of the 2007 to 2009 recession and resistance to their marketing message that their products are superior to competitors by memory keepers.

The emphasis on archival materials permeated the industry, even among non-Creative Memories workers. A respondent who worked in a local scrapbook store recounted how she socialized memory keepers to the “rules” of the hobby via “a little lecture” on archival products. Another worker said: “If you’re going through that time and effort … you should use materials that are … durable and long lasting” — indicating that the product is as important as the process. Further, industry workers implied that there were other people scrapbooking that they did not encounter because these scrapbookers were not following the rule of using archival materials because they did not know the rules yet. Industry workers saw their jobs as not only salespeople, but also as educators on the rules of the hobby.

Memory keepers selected materials for the scrapbook based on archival quality and design principles. “Good” design was understood to be achievable, thanks to the range of scrapbooking media available. Industry workers, however, deemphasized artistry by reminding customers their children care about a complete album: “every page doesn’t have to be a work of art. Your kids aren’t going to care. Your kids don’t care if your handwriting is nice.” By deemphasizing artistry, the hobby became something attainable to anyone, while maintaining industry expectations that scrapbooks were for future generations.
Industry workers suggested that scrapbookers who needed help achieving “good” design on their layouts could develop this skill by consuming scrapbooking-focused media (i.e., magazines and TV shows) and implementing the techniques taught in these venues. Scrapbookers, however, were less enthusiastic regarding the usefulness of this media. Hobbyists reported using magazines or TV shows if the content adhered to their style, if they needed to be inspired, to find layouts to scraplift (i.e., copy a layout), or to learn a technique. It was the rare hobbyist who adhered to media recommendations:

**Interviewer:** What type of things do you include on the scrapbook page?

**Respondent:** Well, according to *Creating Keepsakes* [the leading industry magazine until its closure in 2013] (laughs), a title, pictures, journaling, [and] embellishments.

In contrast, most memory keepers who consumed this media, clarified that the magazines and TV shows did not reflect how they actually scrapbooked. Media was described as too “trendy” compared to what they actually wanted to accomplish as scrapbookers which was “get[ting] the stories down.” Moreover, scrappers criticized the media’s focus on beginners (which they were not) and for showcasing complicated, expensive, or outdated layouts making scrapbooking-focused media mostly irrelevant. Other scrapbookers were oblivious to the existence of scrapbooking-focused media. Industry workers, however, relied on this media as part of their job of socializing new hobbyists (i.e., customers). Therefore, even those unaware of scrapbooking media were indirectly influenced by it via industry workers, who did use it.

Memory keepers learned the tasks and standards of the hobby by taking classes, too. Stores, direct sellers, and media companies put on classes to teach memory keepers everything from the basics for new hobbyists to techniques for the more advanced scrapbookers. Some participants suggested a class was necessary to begin creating albums, others either never took a class or only did so when their audience changed. For example, one scrapbooker explained she took a class because

> My partner’s mother is turning 80 and she wants me to do a scrapbook for her mother and I was nervous about all these old pictures and I don’t want to mess it up and I wanted it to look presentable because all these [photographs] are like really old … that’s why I took the class so I could be more professional.

She now made layouts using colorful and patterned papers instead of relying on the plain white paper that comes with most albums. The class led her to reject the materials that came with the album and instead purchase additional papers to make her album — ensuring “good” design, while serving the needs of the industry to sell more product.

Rules, however, were selectively deemphasized (e.g., good design) by industry workers and viewed as flexible by hobbyists. One memory keeper said:
My style is more toward the *simple scrapbooking philosophy*. It’s more about cleaner lines. It’s more about non-chronological scrapbooking. It’s more story-based usually and it’s not really about using a lot of product although I have gone through phases where any one of those statements would be untrue.

Instead of disregarding the rules as unnecessary, she fit her style within an existing industry-promoted philosophy (i.e., “simple scrapbooking”) so no matter what she did, she would be following “the rules.” Another scrapper supported the flexibility of “the rules.” He stated:

Scrapbooking is very personal. So, there is nothing that I can say that is how you should scrapbook. There is no ‘should, could, would.’ It is whatever you want to make it. So you need a book, you need acid-free [i.e., archival] everything and go play, and just have fun.

The rules may be flexible, but the range of scrapworthy stories deemed acceptable was evidenced by the availability of product to support those stories. A point of contention was the lack of products reflecting minority-group members. For example, the heteronormativity of the industry frustrated one scrapper:

I don’t think there’s any scrapbooking products at all [intended] for gay and lesbian scrappers … it just really gets on my last nerve … when you try to find a packet of paper about romance … there’s always some sticker in there that says, “the man I love,” and that’s irritating to me. … I know that I’m not the only lesbian scrapbooker.

The industry communicated who hobbyists should be and what stories were worth memorializing through the creation and promotion of products reflecting the norms of an industry dominated by LDS and conservative Christians.

Industry workers, however, did not assert that having a particular religious perspective was necessary to work in the industry. Instead, industry workers emphasized the importance of being a hobbyist to working in this industry because it meant the worker would know “what best to suggest to other people” because they could “speak the same [scrapbooking] language.” One respondent said otherwise “You’d just sell them [scrapbookers] the product but you wouldn’t be able to give them extra help … [and] ideas.” This extra help involved workers advising customers to use the hobby to preserve the narratives prompted by the photographs instead of only to organize photos, as many customers initially intended. One worker said:

If you don’t write the story that goes with the pictures, then your pictures are going to end up in a yard sale. … We have old pictures from our family that are not identified so they’re really meaningless because we don’t know who they are. … [T]ell something about the pictures. That’s what brings it to life. That’s what makes it meaningful and that’s what makes it lasting.

Without the story (i.e., journaling), the photos and memorabilia are meaningless. As one memory keeper put it: “scrapbooking is about heart and soul. The pictures are the heart of the album and the journaling is its soul.”
Tell Something About the Pictures

Who Is Scrapbooking For?

Journaling may have given meaning to what might otherwise be meaningless photographs, but did anyone look at the albums? I asked respondents who the albums were for to see how scrapbookers adhered to the standard promoted by the industry, which was that the albums were for future generations. Memory keepers, however, were less committed to this standard. A gay man scrapper, who anticipated having children, said:

They are for me. … I mean if nobody was to ever look at them … I will probably be a little disappointed that I have put in some time and effort … but … the purpose is not to share it necessarily.

Other scrappers intended to eventually give their albums to their children. Several scrapbooking mothers said their daughters, not their sons, would take ownership of the albums. These women did not see sons as caring about the scrapbooks like their daughters presumably would. One scrapbooking mother explained:

I guess it’s stereotypical, isn’t it? Part of it is when I look at my own experiences in my own life that we have items [from] my husband’s childhood that he just doesn’t really care if we keep them or not and I see value in them that he doesn’t.

Regardless of who would keep the albums, most scrapbooks were incomplete narratives, suggesting future generations may be unable to interpret them without their creator.

Industry workers may have stressed the importance of journaling so that future generations can read the story without the scrapbooker, yet even albums with words prompted an oral narrative. The scrapbooker and biographical other shared additional details, suggesting the narrative’s incompleteness. For example, one layout contained a photograph of the respondent, her son, and her husband together. The journaling read, “Lunch with mom and dad ’04.” The respondent explained “we were going to lunch [at school] with our son one day and I think it’s really the only time that both of us [mom and dad] were able to eat lunch with him … It was just a rare occasion where we got to be together.” Her son pointed out how “it was probably the first time my dad had ever came to eat lunch with me, too. My mom normally comes.” The audience only learned that it was unusual for both parents to go to lunch at school with their son through the oral narrative.

Further complicating the interpretation was that scrapbooks lacked distinct beginnings and endings. For most, only those albums which focused on subjects with a known beginning and ending (e.g., a wedding) had a clear beginning and ending. Even a title page was not necessarily indicative of a beginning. For example, one respondent always included a title page that summarized the book as opposed to marking a beginning. He noted that “every book that’s just a general book [i.e., an assortment of topics] starts with this page that says [what is] in this book.” Most narratives continued into multiple volumes of albums though scrappers rarely provided
any indication of this continuation in the scrapbooks themselves, such as marking the album with a volume number.

This mismatch between industry expectations and practice was exemplified by the focus hobbyists and non-hobbyists put on the hobby. Memory keepers valued the process over completed albums, whereas they reported how others were mostly interested in the finished albums. The emphasis on process over product was why scrapbookers rarely even looked at their albums or were not distressed if an album was lost. For example, one respondent lost an album and said: “It wasn’t as devastating as I thought because I did it all with my mom and the process was already kind of done.”

Scrapbooking and the resulting albums were for the hobbyist. Albums were typically made either with no specific audience in mind or a vague notion that family would at least look at the albums. Most respondents did not have an intended audience beyond “anybody” who would look or showed an “interest” (i.e., biographical others and scrapbooking peers) and the scrapper’s immediate family (especially mothers and pre-teen children). One respondent explained:

I’ve come to realize that [the scrapbooks are] more for me and my family, other people really aren’t that interested. ... The people who don’t scrapbook don’t seem very interested. ... Family seems kind of interested. And of course nuclear family is very interested.

While jointly interviewing a scrapper and her mother, I probed the mother to find out why she enjoyed looking at her daughter’s albums. Her daughter (the key respondent) interjected:

I love to pore over [mom’s] pages because I’m a scrapbooker. I love to pore over anyone’s pages. I love to just sit there and look at their photographs and read their journaling and it’s fascinating to me even if it’s like the most boring thing ever because ... it’s partly a voyeuristic thing ... and it’s partly to get ideas for how I could do a scrapbook ... I’m more interested in the scrapbook pages that she does than I am in a stranger’s because I’m emotionally invested in her because she’s my mom and so if it’s important to her, then I would want to know what it is and why she’s interested in it and what she thinks about it.

Hobbyists were willing to share their albums with nearly anyone who was interested, though their typical audience was small. Mothers of memory keepers, other family members who made scrapbooks, and pre-teen children consistently showed interest in the albums.

Scrapbookers placed limits on what they shared making albums semi-private. For instance, some memory keepers shared layouts online having less control over the audience and their interpretations. One respondent shared layouts on her personal and public blog, so that her mom could see her layouts, but said she “feels immensely restrained ... because ... it’s open to whoever happens to be on the internet and finds it, including possibly my employer.” She did not post layouts of her lesbian relationship on the website and said, “I would not be worried about this if it were
a straight relationship.” While she had an intended audience (i.e., her mom), her method of sharing the layouts meant that she might have an unintended audience limiting what she was willing to share. Audience, however, did not influence the content of her albums, it only influenced how she shared her scrapbook.

Scrapworthiness: Content and Process

Autobiographic work involved deciding how to share the albums and deciding the scrapworthiness of memories and things, thereby, connecting personal lives with social norms. Scrappers showed me pages about common events such as holidays (e.g., Christmas) or life transitions (e.g., weddings) illustrating broader cultural norms of remembrance within scrapbooks. Moreover, layouts contained common elements. For example, typical pages on childbirth and pregnancy included sonogram photographs and medical bracelets, while atypical pages included government assistance checks. Most memory keepers incorporated photographs on their pages. Hobbyists used photographs of people rather than of things (e.g., buildings or nature) and photographs of people rarely included those of body parts or nudity.

Memory keepers paired photographs with journaling on layouts, but the content of journaling varied in depth. For example, one scrapbooker always included the date the photographs were taken (not the date scrapbooked), a title, and a caption for the photographs (e.g., “Elizabeth’s visit to New York”), consistent with the details one might find in a photograph album. In contrast, other scrappers went beyond a caption explaining how the photographs made them feel. For example, one respondent’s layout about her dad’s large feet included a close-up photograph of his feet in his shoes and another photo of him with her daughter. She wrote: “Papa wears size 13 shoes. I used his shoes when I was a clown [at Halloween]. He has better use for his shoes like planting [gardening] with my daughter. As a parent, his are hard shoes to fill.” She began with a basic description, moved onto her past experience of the shoes to the present with her daughter, and closed by reflecting on her own parenting.

Few scrapbookers could detail how they decided what was worth memorializing because they had internalized the rules or “took them for granted” (i.e., part of their “taken for granted” social world). One scraper explained his decision-making process:

Take a week-long vacation as the subject. I … lay out the photographs by day [i.e., chronological]. Whatever happened Monday goes in the Monday pile. … I will then pick through the pile for each day … eliminate blurry photos [i.e., quality] and photos to be used elsewhere. I will then start to lay out the page, so I will lay out the photos first and how I really want to prioritize the photos based on what [physically] fits. And then I add stickers and journaling.

He organized photographs chronologically, then selected photographs based on quality and what physically fit on the page.

Most respondents struggled to clearly articulate why something was scrapworthy because it seemed obvious. Autobiographical norms were rooted in collective
mnemonic norms and cultural practices outside of scrapbooking. For example, I asked a respondent why she used orange paper on her Thanksgiving-themed layout. She responded, “Well, isn’t it Thanksgivingy [sic]?” Her decision relied on American symbolism regarding Thanksgiving, which associated orange with the holiday. Moreover, scrapbook supplies conformed to holiday color norms (e.g., green and red for Christmas) reflecting how most memory keepers actually scrapbook. Industry workers, however, emphasized that design principles should be followed (e.g., select products using the color scheme found in the photographs). Therefore, a tension exists between memory keepers and workers on what “the rules” should be.

The content of scrapbooks followed two main patterns: (1) special events (e.g., holidays or weddings) and (2) everyday life (e.g., daily routines). Some memory keepers transitioned from recording events to scrapbooking the “everyday” signifying what is meaningful to a scrapper can change. One respondent who focused on ordinary moments in her albums explained that “I don’t want to forget the little things,” and she was confident she would remember the major life events without the albums. Another respondent echoed these thoughts; she said the everyday is a “bigger deal” than the special occasions. She related:

The big events get scrapbooked but I tend to do them almost less, like Christmas just gets a page and I know in my first scrapbook, it got like a whole spread of pages because it just seemed so important because it was my son’s first Christmas. But now Christmas seems much smaller than the everyday. Years from now, you’re going to look back and think, “Oh, first Christmas! Wow that was special!” But what was more special was that day you looked at your child and thought, “Wow, you’re growing up,” and having the feelings that you have about those are more special.

When respondents considered special occasions and ordinary moments as scrap-worthy, it complicated how something became memorable. Every happening was potentially worth remembering and recording. Hobbyists came to perceive the world as scrappers, assessing whether or not something was or was not scrapworthy and the more involved they became with the hobby, the more of their world was scrapworthy. The hobby became a mnemonic barometer. As one respondent explained:

My whole point in doing this is that it’s our life. … I just scrapbook our life. I don’t edit things out. We’re very fortunate. I haven’t had a lot of really bad things happen that I’ve had to make that choice of ‘gee, I don’t want to scrapbook it.’ The only really bad thing was the miscarriage and I did scrapbook it.

Beyond photographs, words, and purchased products, memory keepers saved mementos (i.e., memorabilia and ephemera). Mementos became scrapworthy because they were meaningful, added to the story, or were aesthetically pleasing. Scrapworthy items included news articles (e.g., about family members or current events), paper products (e.g., invitations), worn items (e.g., a newborn’s hat), organic matter (e.g., seashells), and miscellaneous items (e.g., expired driver’s license). Items became scrapworthy because they gave meaning to a story. For instance, one
respondent explained that she is “constantly seeing things that I could use on a scrapbooking page, like Band-Aids®. ... You could totally use those on a page like where they [my kids] got their shots.” Band-Aids® give meaning to a layout on childhood vaccinations.

Occasionally, a story became scrapworthy because scrapbooking media issued a challenge to make a layout on a particular topic. For example, one scrapper made a layout describing her commute to work because it was suggested by a website-devoted to issuing scrapbooking challenges. Memory keepers bought scrapbook supplies and other items simply for the challenge of figuring out how to use the item on a layout. Challenges range from scrapbooking a given topic, technique, or supplies already owned (i.e., scrapbooking stash).

To explore the norms of remembrance, I asked memory keepers how they would record a child’s first birthday. Respondents worked through a mnemonic checklist of the items they would save and moments they would photograph. For instance, memory keepers said they would take a photograph of the child’s cake-covered face. This expectation was so normative that one memory keeper staged the photo. She said “I took some frosting and put it on her face just for the sake of having that classic photo” because her daughter wanted nothing to do with the cake on her birthday.

Most respondents struggled to explain their decision to include what they did in the scrapbook, especially once they accounted for photographs and journaling. Photographs were chosen for their quality or ability to tell a cohesive story. Memory keepers, however, included photographs of lower quality if they were the only photograph of an event, person, or thing. No one included every photograph, piece of memorabilia, or purchased embellishment in her or his albums. Memory keepers selected stories for the scrapbook for the value of the “memory” along with the availability of photographs, memorabilia, and embellishments.

DISCUSSION

I extend DeGloma’s (2010, 2014) use of the concept of autobiographical community to analyze the community surrounding the person doing the autobiographical work (i.e., biographical others, audience, and [scrapbooking] thought community) in greater detail, with attention to how they shape the process of narrative construction. These narratives (e.g., scrapbooks) cannot be understood without taking into account how this community mnemonically socializes the scrapper and shapes the resulting story. This influence ranged from biographical others adding their own oral narrative to albums to industry workers setting the standards for hobbyists. Other scholars have explored how memory keepers regulate each other at crops (Demos 2006), but not how they are socialized into the norms of memory keeping outside of crops as this research does. Further, my respondents were less active users of scrapbooking media compared to earlier studies (Demos 2006; Downs 2006) suggesting
limits to the influence of industry workers. Hobbyists recognized industry-promoted “tasks and standards” (i.e., “rules”) and embraced, rejected, and refashioned them.

Scrapbookers have more freedom to treat the “rules” of scrapbooking as flexible because of their voluntariness (Zussman 2000) and mostly emerge from the bottom up (Zussman 2006). The industry, however, promotes the albums as for future generations, which is in line with LDS beliefs regarding researching and keeping family histories and suggests a less voluntary side of the hobby. This standard permeates the industry and is observed by other scholars (see Goodsell and Seiter 2011). My research indicates that among a heterogeneous sample, scrapbookers are less committed to this standard. In short, an LDS belief system supportive of keeping family histories can be observed within the industry, but is less obvious among scrapbookers—LDS or not.

Zussman (2012) proposes four types of narratives (i.e., therapy, confession, self-invention, and reunion) along two dimensions (i.e., audience authority and intention and consequence). My research suggests a fifth type of narrative: the authenticity narrative. Scrapbooks emerge from the bottom up, like self-invention and reunion narratives, but they are not particularly transformative (i.e., therapy or self-invention) or restorative narratives (i.e., confession or reunion). Instead scrapbooks function as authenticity narratives, that is, narratives of stability, the ordinary, or everyday life. Their primary narrative intent is to demonstrate stability or in Giddens’ (1991:54) terms—biographical continuity. There are narratives that use scrapbooks as an autobiographical method that can and do fit into Zussman’s (2012) four types of narratives, but the scrapbooks examined in this study do not neatly fit into his categories.

The pairing of detailed text and photographs further distinguishes scrapbooks from other narratives, such as photo albums or social media status updates enabling the audience to better interpret the meaning of the photographs intended by the scrapper. The captions, however, often fall short and require an oral narrative, too. As Kurasawa (2013:25) finds, photographs “do not consistently speak for themselves or have clearly assigned meanings,” captions are needed to “complete the signifying process.” My research suggests an additional purpose of captions (or journaling): a future in which one no longer remembers the past. Respondents recognized that their memories are already incomplete and are at further risk of being lost entirely as they age. Scrapbooks, then, serve as a repository of one’s memories for the time when one’s biological memory has declined. Whereas, “the constant tension at reunions is between the pull of the past and the pull of the present” (Zussman 2012:816), scrapbooks suggest the pull of the future, when one’s biological memory has faded or lost completely.

Moreover, few people look at the albums, suggesting that the narrative a memory keeper aims to communicate with their photographs and journaling may be lost to history regardless of their intention. That albums are rarely looked at by others suggests limits to the narrative freedom of scrapbooks. While hobbyists can and do tell whatever stories they want, the stories may go unheard (see Zussman 2006, 2012).
Memory keepers, however, note that the process of scrapbooking — or “the capacity to keep a particular narrative going” (Giddens 1991:54) — matters more than whether anyone looks at the albums.

The autobiographic feature of scrapbooks is less obvious than that of other autobiographical occasions (e.g., resumes) because memory keepers rarely make pages explicitly about themselves. Scrapbooks, however, do serve as autobiographies because the stories recorded are those stories the scrappers have decided are worth memorializing from their perspective. Even when the album appears to be memorializing other people, the hobbyist is telling stories about herself or himself (see Christensen 2011; Goodsell and Seiter 2011; Stewart 1993). The memory keeper selects which elements to include in the narrative (Downs 2006). The scrapbooker chooses what story to “tell about the pictures.”

Hobbyists come to perceive the world around them through the lens of scrapbooking. They assess whether or not something is scrapworthy mediated by what they have available to use (e.g., photographs, memorabilia, and product). This perception frames their lives even when not scrapbooking through practices such as carrying a camera everywhere (see Goodsell and Seiter 2011) or saving ephemera (e.g., tags off of clothing) instead of throwing it away. By interviewing memory keepers with their albums, this research contributes to an understanding of how autobiographers determine what is memorable. I show how autobiographers simultaneously work through a mnemonic checklist (e.g., organizing photos by day) while ignoring much of the decision-making process as they “reconstruct[ing] the memories that are put down on paper” (Zussman 1996:147).

This research shows that scrapbookers coalesce as a thought community of scrapbookers rather than a thought community of mothers or wives who also scrapbook in less diverse samples. The albums come to look more similar than different on account of collective mnemonic norms in the broader culture and the influence from the industry — especially through the availability of products. The industry, in particular, deserves more scrutiny regarding how it shapes the scrapworthiness of particular narratives. For instance, future research should examine how the availability of products geared toward mainstream themes influences what stories are scrapbooked. The LDS and conservative Christian influence within the industry informs the lack of products geared toward gay and lesbian hobbyists, for example. Downs (2006) found that the Christian and patriotic beliefs of an individual store owner was reflected in the product the store owner chose to carry, but what is missing is a thorough analysis of the products that are available to a store owner to select from in the first place. Further, Downs (2006) observed that scrapbooks reflected happy families due to products (as chosen by a store owner) supporting this narrative. Christensen (2011) found that hobbyists made decisions about what to record using the product they already owned and Demos (2006) noted that scrapbookers bought product according to future events in their children’s lives. I find that some things become scrapworthy simply because product exists to support the narrative or because it offers a challenge to the scrapper. The product made a story scrapworthy. This research lends additional
support to the relationship between the availability of product and the selection of scrapworthy stories among memory keepers.

While some memory keepers systematically made decisions about what to include on a layout and how to include it, others were less rigorous. Scrapbookers decided what to incorporate according to its availability and thought community norms. Though the industry was influential in terms of suggesting possible scrapworthy topics, the emergence of scrappers sharing what they make on personal blogs and social media, which is free of editorial oversight and advertiser’s expectations, may increase the range of narratives considered scrapworthy.

**CONCLUSION**

I expand Zussman’s (1996, 2006) notion of autobiographical occasion by describing how a wider community shapes autobiographic work. Memory keepers suggested their scrapbooking is at least somewhat influenced by their real or imagined audience, the industry (workers, media, and products), other scrapbookers, biographical others, and the other thought communities to which the memory keeper belongs. Industry workers demonstrated their roles as “experts” on the hobby. Further, the heterogeneity of my sample (i.e., race, gender, sexual identity, and religion) strengthens the point that hobbyists coalesce as a thought community of scrapbookers. Memory keepers come to perceive the world as scrapbookers, assessing the scrapworthiness of memories and things in dialogue with the larger autobiographical community.

Another goal of this research was to uncover how effective scrappers were at communicating their intended story on a layout. Despite industry expectations of scrapbooks standing on their own, memory keepers and biographical others expand, confirm, or disconfirm the narrative contained on the layout. The industry may intend for albums to become family heirlooms, but hobbyists were less committed to this standard.

Scholars of autobiography should examine multiple autobiographic-types (e.g., scrapbooks, resumes, social media profiles) produced by the same individual. Each of these autobiographic-types has overlapping and distinct norms of remembrance. The proliferation of social media and the ease of creating a personal blog, may replace some of the functions of the hobby — though memory keepers use these platforms to share their albums, too. How does a memory keeper, for instance, decide which memories should be recorded as a social media status update and which memories should be preserved in an album? Have the norms of remembrance on social media influenced the content of scrapbooks and vice versa?

This research illuminates the norms of remembrance (i.e., the content) emerging within an autobiographical community of scrapbookers, industry workers, and biographical others. Further, I examine the process of doing autobiographic work through examining how the memory keeper decides what to include and exclude from the scrapbook and the role an autobiographical community plays in the process. Like other types of autobiographic work, scrapbooking has rules, though these rules...
are negotiable. The boundaries surrounding what is and is not scrapworthy are more flexible than in typical autobiographical occasions because they are autobiographies without defined occasions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Ralph LaRossa, Wendy Simonds, Adia Harvey Wingfield, Robert Dingwall, Robert Zussman, Thomas DeGloma, Elisabeth O. Burgess, Amanda M. Jungels, Josie Parker, Saori Yasumoto, and Angela Glosser for their insightful comments on earlier drafts.

NOTES

1. In this paper, I use scrapbooker, scrapper, memory keeper, and hobbyist interchangeably. Arguably, memory keeper is a broader term than scrapbooker or scrapper and could encompass practices such as blogging or genealogical research. Memory keeping, however, is a term widely understood by scrapbookers to have originated within the scrapbooking field.

2. The first scrapbooking store opened in Spanish Fork, UT in 1981 and became the first online scrapbook store in 1996 (Helfand 2008). Scrapbook stores sell paper, embellishments, tools, adhesive, idea books, and classes to memory keepers. Supplies are sold at small, locally owned retailers, chains, and online.

3. Crops range from a few hours on a Friday night to an all-day or weekend-long affair and may involve a couple to dozens of people. Crops take place at stores, church basements, hotel conference centers, and private homes and are a place and time for people to come together to socialize and work on their scrapbooks.

REFERENCES


Tell Something About the Pictures


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