A SIMPLER TIME: SOCIAL MEMORY IN SCRAPBOOKS

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• The past and history are social constructions—meaning the way we remember events of the past is influenced and shaped by our society through mnemonic socialization (Zerubavel 1997). Zerubavel (1997:81) writes, “[I]ke the present, the past is to some extent also part of a social reality that, while far from being absolutely objective, nonetheless transcends our own subjectivity and is shared by others around us.” This is important to this study because scrapbookers are recording their version of history. That history may include information about their family or a vacation. Or that history may be devoted to events experienced by many, such as collective tragedies (e.g., 9/11). Scrapbooking is a place to explore the social rules of remembrance (Zerubavel 1997).
• I began my research by asking my respondents to describe what a scrapbook is as if I were a Martian. I followed this up with a small breaching experiment. I showed each scrapbooker in my study a cork-style board with a photo, wedding invitation, grocery list, among other items, a conventional photo album (all photos), and a conventional scrapbook. I asked them to tell me which item or items could be considered scrapbooks.
• My respondents agree that corkboards change too frequently to be considered a scrapbook even though the board might contain elements that are included in scrapbooks. Others thought that corkboards are a variation of scrapbooking—similar to a person’s refrigerator.
• Respondents echoed the popular refrain that scrapbooks are not your grandma’s photo album. Scrapbooks are books of memories, a way to tell one’s story, or both.
• Most scrapbooks are photograph centered. When I pressed respondents as to whether my conventional photograph album could be transformed into a scrapbook, most agreed that it could if I added words and embellishments such as stickers.
• Scrapbooking is a type of memory keeping that typically includes photographs, words, ephemera, and purchased embellishments such as stickers or ribbon.
Research Questions

- Why did scrapbooking increase in popularity?
- How do scrapbooks serve as a source of collective family memory?
- In what ways do scrapbooks illuminate Zerubavel’s (2003) norms of imitation and replication regarding remembrance?
- How do memories become scrapworthy?
- Do scrapookers edit to create perfect narratives in scrapbooks?

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Methods

- Insider status
- Sample
  - 38 Scrapbookers
  - 10 Family and friends of scrapbookers
  - 11 scrapbook industry workers
- More diverse sample:
  - Latter-day Saints (N=8)
  - Men (N=6)
  - Gays, lesbians, or bisexuals (N=10)
  - Scrapbookers of color (N=7)
  - Married or partnered (N=25)
  - Parents (N=19)
  - Work full time (N=19)
  - Work part time (N=8)
  - Mostly middle-class
- Interviews and Photo-Elicitation Interviews
  - Observed and photographed 1,493 layouts from respondents (mean of 40.35 layouts per respondent)

- I began working in a scrapbook store in 2003 and worked there throughout most of my graduate school career. I’ve also worked as a direct seller. I now blog about my dissertation research (where this research comes from), which is enabling me to continue a relationship with both scrapbookers and industry workers and keeps me up to date with the hobby. I began scrapbooking in 2001.

- This research is based on a larger study of 38 scrapbookers, ten family and friends of scrapbookers, and 11 scrapbook industry workers. In addition to interviews, I used photo-elicitation interview techniques with my respondents. I used grounded theory methods to analyze my data.

- Previous research on scrapbooking used samples of scrapbookers who were all women and were predominantly white, married, with children (see Demos 2006; Downs 2006; Goodsell and Seiter 2011; Kelley and Brown 2005; Stalp and Winge 2008). I took care to include a more diverse group in this study eventually focusing my recruiting on harder-to-reach scrapbookers, including Latter-day Saints (N=8), men (N=6), gays, lesbians, or bisexuals (N=10), and scrapbookers of color (N=7). My sample of scrapbookers ranged in age from 21-67,
similar to Demos (2006) and Downs’ (2006) samples. Fewer of my respondents were currently married or partnered (N=25) or had children (N=19) compared to other studies. A larger share of my respondents worked (19 worked full-time and eight worked part-time). My sample skews middle-class. Only ten respondents had household incomes of less than $39,000 and five of them were currently college students. Overall, every respondent had at least some college education and the majority had completed a college degree. Scrapbooking has been dismissed as something primarily done by White, married, middle-class women with children and sometimes out of religious devotion. As an industry worker, I knew that there is more diversity among scrapbookers than this and I purposely set out to explore this diversity.

• I conducted interviews with all respondents and photo-elicitation interviews with all respondents except industry workers. I asked my respondents who were scrapbookers to select 10-15 of their scrapbook pages that they felt were representative of their scrapbooking and 5-10 scrapbook pages that they felt were atypical. Every scrapbooker shared her or his scrapbooks with me and allowed me to photograph the pages we discussed. The scrapbookers showed me a mean of 40.35 pages (N=1,493). Some pages were discussed in great detail and others only briefly. I let my respondents show me however many pages they wanted to rather than cutting them off after a predetermined number. Most respondents seemed grateful to share their scrapbook pages with someone who was truly interested in what they were doing, though some seemed skeptical as to why anyone else would be interested in their layouts.

• I used photo-elicitation interview (Blyton 1987; Clark-Ibanez 2004; Gold 2004; Harper 2002; Samuels 2004; Twine 2006) techniques to get at the oral narrative that often accompanies a scrapbook page. I also wanted to learn about the process of scrapbooking, that is, why scrapbookers made the decisions about what was recorded on their layouts. By also interviewing family and friends of the scrapbooker, I
was able to explore any contested versions of what really happened based on the stories recorded in the scrapbook. I embedded the photographs of the scrapbook layouts in my transcripts and analyzed them together rather than separately.

• The social pattern of memory and how scrapbooks serve as a source of collective memory are two themes that emerged from the data that I wish to explore today.
Findings

- The growth of scrapbooking
- Collective family memory
- Imitation and replication
- Scrapworthy memories
- (Im)perfect memories

- Scrapbookers and industry workers point to a common narrative regarding why scrapbooking grew in popularity at the time it did.
- Scrapbooks are a source of a family’s collective memory.
- Imitation and replication regularly occurs in scrapbooks suggesting scrapbooks draw on a common collective memory of history and culture.
- What gets scrapbooked can be thought of as scrapworthy memories. What gets left out, can be thought of as what is worth forgetting.
- Despite an overemphasis on happy memories, scrapbookers can and do include imperfect memories that contradict perpetual happiness.
Since the late 1980s, scrapbooking experienced tremendous growth. At its peak, one could find entire aisles devoted to scrapbooking at such diverse retailers as Office Depot, Barnes and Noble, and Target. The industry has since retreated to a $1.44 billion industry in 2010 (CHA Media 2011) from a peak of $2.5 billion in 2003 (Castleman 2008).

I asked my respondents what they thought accounted for this increase in scrapbooking’s popularity.

Respondents point to several cultural changes: technological innovation, collective tragedies (e.g., 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the Iraq War), and changes in family norms as contributing to the growth of the scrapbooking industry.

- Scrapbooking is both a result of and a way to resist technological innovations.
  - Scrapbookers mentioned how digital cameras have increased the number of photos they take. They have more photos than they did with film that need managed in some way. Part of the drop off in scrapbooking since the time of my interviews could be due to further changes in
technology. Today, it is incredibly easy to take a photo with a camera phone and upload it to facebook or instagram with journaling, reducing the need for scrapbooking as a way to manage photos.

- Respondents talked about how technology is sign of busyness or a fast pace of modern life. Scrapbooking is a way to resist this busyness because it forces the scrapbooker to slow down a bit. One respondent said:
  - “I think part of it is our culture is becoming more and more isolated between technology and busyness and somehow the expectation that we have to do everything and I think scrapbooking subconsciously harkens back to a simpler time and stopping to relive those memories and capture them for future generations. ... Plus it's a way to connect with people. When you pass them in the car or you’re at the soccer game and everyone's on their own cell phone, you don't connect.”

- Technology and busyness are perceived as related to each other and both contribute to a sense of disconnection. Scrapbooking is perceived as a solution, that is, a way to feel connected to others.

- The growth in the scrapbook industry increased alongside collective tragedies that have become sociotemporal landmarks for many Americans.
  - In particular, 9/11 was cited by many respondents as a collective tragedy that prompted people to get “back down to what was really important in their life.” Hurricane Katrina and the Iraq War were also mentioned as events that served as “wake-up calls” to people and led more people to become scrapbookers. Not one scrapbooker in this study, however, cited any collective tragedy as the reason or even a reason they started or continue to
scrapbook. Instead it was given as a reason that other people took up scrapbooking.

• Zerubavel (2003) argues that people “experience nostalgia during periods of dramatic change” (p. 39). Kuhn (2002:49) argues that simply taking a photograph to record a memory assumes “a future when things will be different, anticipating a need to remember what will soon be past.” Scrapbooking may be a way for people and families to construct and maintain an identity that has been confronted by rapid change, such as that experienced during collective tragedies.

• Not only have collective tragedies been credited as the impetus to focus more on “what is important,” but perceived changes in family norms are also thought to contribute to this newfound interest in scrapbooking.

• In contrast to popular perceptions of the family as falling apart, scrapbookers talk about how family seemed more important than it did in the past.

• Respondents mention geographical distance among families and a greater child-centered focus within families.

• One industry worker suggests that scrapbooking is popular because our culture has come back “to the importance of family and preserving some sort of heritage of history because nowadays people are spread out from their families a lot more than it used to be. ...in some ways it’s a way to ground ourselves again into our own roots.” Scrapbooking, then, can serve as a means of family connection even if family is separated by geography.

• A scrapbooker says

• “Well I think you know, my mom I think loves looking at them when she comes down because it gives her a sense of what I do, they
live in the Midwest (and he lives in Atlanta) and so they don’t get to see me very often and so these are a way for them to kind of come down and see everything that I’ve done, I don’t tell them about everything. ... I’ve also found though, ...when they come down to visit we don’t want to spend so much time just sitting around looking at scrapbooks, so it’s like we don’t always look at them when they come down, because we want to make new memories and start scrapbooking those.”

• Interestingly, when various scrapbooks and photograph albums were originally patented in the mid- to late-19th century, marketers advertised their products in such a way to emphasize their role within the family and as a substitute of loved ones who were absent through distance or death (Siegel 2006). In other words, geographical distance among families has always been viewed as a reason to scrapbook.

• Another respondent explains how family has changed in that it is more child-centered than it was when she was a child. She argues that this focus on the child has given rise to scrapbooking.

• In sum, scrapbookers and industry workers view the family today differently than family was viewed in the past and these changes have contributed to increased interest in scrapbooking.

• How much has really changed is beside the point. American collective memory suggests that substantial change has occurred. Scrapbooks may be a reaction to this perception. Regardless, scrapbooks are a
site to study not only the collective memory of a larger culture, but the **collective memory of families**.
• The act of scrapbooking is primarily for the scrapbooker. The actual scrapbook may be for the scrapbooker, the scrapbooker’s family, or for another purpose. Scrapbookers, then, are creating scrapbooks not just for themselves, but often for their family as well. This means that scrapbooks can hold a family’s collective memory, at least as recorded and understood by the scrapbooker.

• Family scrapbooks can be used by the scrapbooker to build collective identity as a family (Goodsell and Seiter 2011) and in particular, a mainstream family (Kuhn 1991; see also Goodsell and Seiter 2011). This means that they are directly shaping the family’s collective memory and identity as a family. The scrapbooker helps “corroborate” the family’s memories and give an identity to descendants (see Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Slater 1991).

• Scrapbookers do see their scrapbooks as serving as a source of memories for their children. They recognize that the only reason their children are going to remember some of these stories is because these stories are in the scrapbook. The earliest memories children have come from the stories older family members tell them.
(Zerubavel 1997). For example, one respondent scrapbooked her children’s potty training. I asked if she thought they would remember potty training without the scrapbook and she said “no, they would not.” Through these stories and scrapbooks, children learn what is memorable and parents make a point to record memories for their children, who would not remember without such recordings.

• Though scrapbooks serve as a place where memories can be corroborated, having a family scrapbook does not mean that all family members will have the same collective memory of that family. Different family members remember their family differently.
• Through imitation and replication, collective memory can remain consistent despite perceived change or it can serve to highlight changes over time.
• Zerubavel (2003:46) points out that people remember through imitation and replication. In particular, he argues that by imitating we are attempting to “symbolically relive their lives.”

• Imitation and replication is most obvious in heritage albums
  • Many scrapbookers never even think to use modern-style scrapbook products with photographs that are several decades old. Instead, scrapbookers use products that are reminiscent of an earlier time period, such as in the example on the left. In some instances, vintage patterns and ephemera have been reproduced as scrapbooking products.
    • In heritage albums, scrapbookers not only store older photographs and stories, but attempt to recreate the time period in which those photographs were taken through the use of scrapbooking products. Despite heritage albums being created in the present, they are designed to appear as though they were created during the time period in which the people memorialized actually lived.

• Imitation and replication also happens in layouts that compare the past with the present
• The past guides the present not only in heritage albums which are specifically devoted to memorializing the distant-past, but also in memorializing the more-recent past.
• The idea of creating layouts comparing the past to the present is popular within the industry, but less so among scrapbookers. Most respondents have not done anything like this in their scrapbooks. The most common response to my question about using the past to guide the present was “no, but that’s a good idea.” A couple of respondents mentioned pages they were planning to make sometime that would do this, but had not actually done this. For example, one respondent mentions plans of creating a page about a family name and everyone in the family who shared the same name.
• Being able to do pages comparing the past with the present means a person has a past they want to remember and most likely has photographs that could be included. For example, one respondent talks about how she did not have a fantastic childhood and has very few photographs from her childhood. She said it is highly unlikely that she would ever be able to compare her own childhood to her children’s childhood in her scrapbooks for these reasons.
• Scrapbookers “frame” memories to be remembered in scrapbooks, implying that all other memories can be discarded or ignored (Zerubavel 1991; 2006) (i.e., mnemonically decapitated [Zerubavel 1997]). Scrapbookers are deciding which memories are scrapworthy—or are worth remembering.

• Respondents struggle with explaining why they make the choices they do as far as what is included in the scrapbook, especially after the photograph(s) and journaling were accounted for. Photographs are generally chosen because they are of good quality, tell a cohesive story, or are the only photograph—regardless of quality—of a memory. No one includes every single photograph, piece of memorabilia, or store-bought embellishment in their scrapbook.

• It is the rare scrapbooker who can detail exactly how they decide what is scrapworthy because most respondents have either learned to ignore this decision making process or are completely unaware.

• Most scrapbooks are organized chronologically with holidays and other special events highlighted, though there are niches within the hobby that organize scrapbooks very differently. When possible, scrapbookers tend to use traditional colors and symbols on layouts.
For example, orange and black will be used on layouts about Halloween and red and green will be used on pages about Christmas.
• Scrapbooks rarely tell the whole story of a person’s life. Scrapbookers make editorial decisions as to what is scrapworthy.
• Critics note that scrapbookers then, may focus only on those stories telling the best story or putting themselves in the best light.
• This criticism, though important, misses the point of scrapbooking for many scrapbookers. Scrapbooking is not about telling a complete story, but is about telling a story, is about managing photographs, and sometimes is done for therapeutic or social reasons.
• Moreover, most scrapbooks are photograph-driven so they follow some of the same norms that photography follows. For example, people are more likely to photograph happy moments compared to unhappy moments. Photographs preserve moments people feel are worth remembering (Chalfen 1987; Milgram 1976; Sontag 1973).
• According to Demos (2006), scrapbookers seek to create pages capturing memories—perfect memories. I asked my respondents what perfect meant to them in terms of scrapbooking and in life in general. Most respondents were perplexed by the question because they do not see what they are doing as in any way demonstrating or
attempting to demonstrate perfection. For most, they see what they were doing as demonstrating imperfection in their scrapbooks.

• Respondents did not feel that purposefully leaving out the negative was wrong in any way. One respondent, who scrapbooked her mother’s funeral, says that unhappy memories could still be good memories, regardless of whether they are perfect memories. Others argue that scrapbookers may be striving for perfection or only showcasing happy memories, but they are not unlike non-scrapbookers in this regard. They just happen to be doing it in this particular forum. In other words, respondents recognize that they do leave parts of the story of their lives out of the scrapbook, but that they are like non-scrapbookers in this regard.

• It is important to note that scrapbookers do not only include the things they want to remember and simply forget the rest. Some memories—especially unhappy memories—are not things my respondents think they will ever forget. There are rarely photographs or other mementos of unhappy moments so these moments rarely get scrapbooked. Moreover, most of my respondents said they do not scrapbook unhappy moments because they generally only have happy memories. They have not experienced unexpected deaths or other unhappy moments for the most part. Some have had a death of a loved one or had unhappy childhoods, but my respondents seem to be genuinely happy with their current lives.

• Respondents who have created scrapbook pages about unhappier moments shared some of those pages with me. Scrapbook pages about unhappier times, generally, do not look any different than scrapbook pages about happier times; even the respondent who scrapbooked her mother’s funeral uses a very cheerful and bright color palette in her scrapbook. One would not realize the scrapbook was about a funeral just from a quick glance.

• I find that scrapbookers generally adhere to a norm of honesty in their scrapbooks. Despite Downs’ (2006) assertion that scrapbookers regularly “uninvite” people from their scrapbooks and Demos’ (2006)
argument that scrapbookers are presenting images of perfect lives, I do not find this overall. Some scrapbookers may strive for perfection for some memories, layouts, and albums some of the time, but it is not standard practice. Perhaps the difference stems from differences between our samples. Demos’ (2006) and Downs’ (2006) samples were derived from scrapbookers who attended in-store crops. These scrapbookers were scrapbooking publicly and would be sharing their scrapbook pages with other scrapbookers at these crops as is a crop norm. Many of my respondents have never attended a crop. Few share their scrapbooks with other scrapbookers or strangers. Therefore, there is less need to showcase themselves in the best light.
• Scrapbooking has increased in popularity and respondents point to similar reasons for it’s increase suggesting a collective memory of scrapbooking and American history.
• Scrapbooks serve as a source of collective memory for families and serve as a source of early memories for children.
• Scrapbookers use imitation and replication in their scrapbooks drawing on a collective memory of the past of society and their family.
• Ultimately, what gets included in scrapbooks are scrapworthy memories. What gets left out can be thought of what is forgettable. In this way, others learn what is and is not memorable.
• Scrapbookers, for the most part, do not carefully edit their stories to present an image of perpetual happiness.
• Overall, scrapbookers are a type of memory keeper and some of their norms are the same as other memory keeper’s norms (such as photographers). Because most scrapbooks reside within families, they have the potential to be the main source of a family’s collective memory. The scrapbooker’s memory may then become the family’s memory.
References


A memory scrapbook is a great way of preserving details of the important events in your family and recording family history for future generations to enjoy. Most of us have a ton of photographs lying around in boxes and drawers, waiting to be sorted out. Although it's a great place to keep your pictures, a scrapbook is much more than just a photograph album. Over the years, scrapbooks have become more and more elaborate. The one pictured above is very simple but it gives a great insight into the type of things that the woman who created it felt were worth preserving. A scrapbook can be made for any occasion, such as a wedding, birthday, trip to the zoo, graduation day, new baby - anything you want to preserve memories of. It can cover a single event or a whole lifetime.