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Studies in Conservation
Dissociation and loss: A challenge for sustainable & inclusive conservation
--Manuscript Draft--

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Full Title:	Dissociation and loss: A challenge for sustainable & inclusive conservation
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Keywords:	dissociation; respectful disagreement; risk; meaning; loss
Abstract:	The agents of deterioration (AoD) offer a structured and comprehensive categorization of hazards to collections they are a basis for risk-informed preservation management and hence, what preventive conservators are expected to manage effectively within their organisations. In drawing up the AoD their creators were not ignorant of wider societal issues of concern to conservators, but they envisaged them to be part of a broader institutional activity located beyond the scope of preventive conservation. Within conservation, there have been discussions about additional agents; social, cultural, or political causes of loss. Their continued exclusion from the ten agents may mistakenly be interpreted as a lack of consideration of such concerns. There are reasons to limit the scope of the preventive conservation system, but not everyone agrees that those reasons are sufficient to justify this scope limitation. This paper is a discussion and disagreement by two authors, XXX argues that dissociation should capture any loss of meaning resulting from any aspect of conservation practice, including cleaning, documentation, failure to respect beliefs, etc. She argues that dissociation from context may stop preventive conservators from identifying and respecting optimal traditional sustainable methods and techniques. XXX argues that the threat of losing context information about collection items should be managed as part of the wider cultural heritage institution's role and resolved through their engagement with the community. XXX acknowledges that preventive conservation can contribute to understanding and mitigating this form of loss, but primary responsibility for such concerns is beyond the boundaries of preventive conservation.

Dissociation and loss: A challenge for sustainable & inclusive conservation

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Authors

Abstract

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Keywords

Dissociation, respectful disagreement, risk, preventive conservation, loss, meaning

Introduction

In recent years, there is growing recognition of loss of value resulting from the separation of cultural property from the very segments of society that value it (Chipangura 2023, Cook et al 2023, Tichman and Abrahams 2021). These separations have been, and continue to be, from multiple causes including colonialization, financial and social exploitation, and discrimination. In conservation models of collaborative international and interdisciplinary work have increased professional interaction among communities, within and without the authorised heritage sector (Balachandran and McHugh 2019 Wharton 2008). This creates resonance with the concept of dissociation which has been centred on linking tangible information to collections. Inadequate past practise by many museums has resulted in collections lacking adequate and appropriate associated information. Documentation failures have led to the loss of significant elements of the intangible knowledge and meanings related to items in our collections. Leading us to ask: Is the management of the loss of intangible information or association essential to conservation practice and does this fall within scope of the ten agents of deterioration (AoD)? To answer this first we examine the AoD framework to understand its origins and rationale.

Risk management for preventive conservation

The adaption of risk-informed approaches to preventive conservation was made possible by combining the concepts of a categorization of hazards, such as the 10 AoD (hereafter simply 'agents'), with categorization of types of risk based on frequency of occurrence. This provided a basis for documenting the degree of confidence that risks to cultural property could be described sufficiently comprehensively (Waller 2008, 2019) in an approach consistent with the Hierarchical Holographic Model (Haimes et al 2002). The claim to comprehensiveness depends not just on a hierarchical taxonomy for generic and specific risks but equally on clear definition of boundaries on the preservation system (Waller 2003), whether that is a collection unit, all items accessioned by an institution, or a country's collectively defined cultural property.

The management of risks is important, but it is not the sole objective for preventive conservation. It is critical not to equate the collection risk management system with the preventive conservation function. The management system involves and serves many departments or sections beyond conservation. Also, preventive conservation works within collection management systems other than preservation, specifically collection development and collection use. Meaningful quantification of risks demands absolute clarity about what is and what is not to be included in quantification. For example, the preservation system focuses on future change so does not conflate existing damage with future risk. That is, estimation of future loss in values are expressed as loss from the current state, whether that happens to be pristine, impacted by use, or even severely worn. The same distinction would be applied to examples of dissociation. Risk management does not seek to describe the totality of loss but only to capture potential future changes.

Introducing the 10 agents

In the 1980s, Stefan Michalski at the Canadian Conservation Institute developed a framework for preventive and remedial conservation based on set of nine 'agents of deterioration' (Michalski 1990). This, with minor modifications, has become the most familiar framework for categorizing hazards that can cause changes to cultural property. They are commonly known as the ten agents of deterioration. In the context of risk analysis, the term agent of change (AoC; Strlič et al. 2013) connotes a better understanding of risks that range from continual deterioration processes, through sporadic incidents, to rare events. Each agent, combined with one of three types of risk (rare events, sporadic incidents, or continual processes) leads to what is termed a 'generic risk'. Those generic risks provide a framework for organizing plausible risk scenarios (such as flood from overhead pipes in store) within clearly and concisely defined specific risks (Table 1).

Although the most useful risk profiles tend to be at the generic risk level, definition at the specific risk level is essential for unambiguous quantification. Although this complete hierarchical description of risks can seem like an effort intensive process, it leads at every level, to focusing effort away from trivial issues and toward more significant issues. In that way, it can be both more efficient and less prone to bias than other preservation planning approaches.

Adding dissociation

Shortly after the launch of the nine agents, Waller (1994) introduced a tenth agent initially termed 'custodial neglect' to account for issues of loss of information and the connection of information to items of cultural property. Unfortunately, the choice of the term 'neglect' led to any factor contributing to loss in collections, including lack of staff, training, funds, etc. being identified as hazards. This ran counter to

the intent of risk analysis to identify risks as closely as possible to technical, ideally direct causes of change, rather than secondary, tertiary, or more distant factors. To better reflect the use of the tenth agent to group risks that could be clearly identified and quantified, the term 'custodial neglect' was replaced by the term 'dissociation'.

Discussing dissociation

Dissociation is one of the less clearly understood agents of change. Dissociation is currently associated with a loss of items or associations. That said, the boundaries of dissociation are regularly tested, and some practitioners use the term to describe other forms of loss of information. Thus, dissociation might now be understood either as

1. a hazard leading to well-defined risks to accessioned (legally owned) items, or
2. a consequence of isolating items from their relevant social and cultural contexts

The remainder of this paper offers a constructive disagreement about the meaning and scope of the term dissociation. Constructive disagreement avoids defensive reactions which builds trust and encourages collaboration (Geal 2017). A sustainable profession should develop such skills to facilitate respectful listening, exploration of difference, tolerance of uncertainty and disagreement. Such skills build a more resilient conservation community better equipped to meet the challenges of collaborative and interdisciplinary work.

Exploring difference: should the scope of dissociation be extended?

The following debate between the two authors examines the opportunities and dangers of extending the concept of dissociation. In the first round of exchanges, Henderson argues in favour of the affirmative statement the term 'dissociation', as it is used in conservation, should be extended to include separation of cultural items from their original cultural context.' Then Waller argues in opposition to the statement. There are three rounds of debate which explore common ground but do not reach consensus.

Henderson Extend the scope 1

Preventive conservation should expand the definition of the agent 'dissociation' to include the separation of object and meaning and this separation is a primary concern of preventive conservation. There is a necessity for clear boundaries of the function of preventive conservation as a distinct practice within a broader collection management function. To make the case for a broader conception of dissociation it is necessary to examine what falls within the scope of preventive conservation.

Conservation is defined as:

'all measures and actions aimed at safeguarding tangible cultural heritage while ensuring its accessibility to present and future generations. Conservation embraces preventive conservation, remedial conservation and restoration. All measures and actions should respect the significance and the physical properties of the cultural heritage item.' ICOM CC (2008).

Preservation or preventive conservation is not separate from conservation it is part of it. Conservation practise encompasses value preservation and so the function of preventive conservation is also protecting value. An important platform for conservation decision-making has been the consistent integration of value or significance assessments, 'before heritage is subject to management, there is a process of acknowledgement... via value assessment' (Vargas et al. page 2). Conservation is a process of

navigating value delivery. Value may be in a tangible, material form but it is expressed in its intangible form, and it may be necessary to 'de- privilege' the tangible aspects to illuminate the intangible (Smith 2006). The goals of a conservation intervention on an historic textile might be that it is clean, whole, and not faded. If the textile is a banner once carried in a protest, fought over, torn, and dropped, and is symbolic of an important social movement then its value is captured by its condition and association, a status that challenges simplistic descriptions of damage or loss. A conservator making decisions would put the future care of the object at great risk if they failed to address these values in their work. They must consider whether a stain should be removed, should it be mounted show it as if it was never torn, should the gallery lighting augment the aesthetic or the event? Considering how to preserve value is central to the function and scope of preventive conservation.

As part of sustainable and inclusive approaches for the care of cultural heritage, the concepts of adaptation and 'managed loss' have been explored adding new depth to a previously sometimes casual use of words such as 'damage' and 'deterioration'. These discussions have led to some conservators reconsidering traditional approaches to foreground ethical concerns such as inclusivity and sustainability even over physical continuity.

Preventive conservators have not necessarily abandoned core activities such as humidity management and pest control, but they also find themselves asking broader social questions in the course of their work. In such fertile ground seeds of doubt regarding dissociation are planted. Can a change to an object that may have been described as damage (such as reburial and decay) now be a feature of its values and as such should a conservator facilitate this in a specific context? If failing to allow a traditional practice such as allowing an object to decay could be considered a loss in value, then knowledge of associated beliefs are necessary for appropriate future care. Thus, dissociation of meaning represents past loss but also creates future risk that should be considered within the specific work roles of the conservator.

Waller Do not extend the scope 1

Henderson argues that preserving value is central to the function and scope of preventive conservation and I could not agree more. I agree that the impact of conservation measures, or their absence, both in and around cultural items can have substantial, even critical impact on their values. In the historical context of museology, this has been interpreted as changes in state, such as breakage, wear, soiling, etc. leading to loss of value for traditional purposes such as research or exhibition. In a less myopic, more respectful of diverse cultural values, context this must be interpreted in all the diverse ways that Henderson describes.

Understanding exactly how respecting values should be accomplished, in both conservation treatments and preventive conservation measures, involves ongoing learning within our field. Interestingly, over the past decade, two institutions holding indigenous collections that I have worked with to complete comprehensive collection risk assessments have taken different approaches. In one, a curator with the requisite background and knowledge described the risk of exposure of certain items to a menstruating woman as a loss of value that could be captured as a pollutant type 2 (sporadic incident) risk. Another institution, lacking indigenous curatorial expertise, chose to only assess risks based on a technical sense of values to prevent incorrect presumption of impacts on cultural and spiritual values. It may be that both institutions acted in their most responsible way, or perhaps learning of the choice made by one institution could change the choice made by another. Our field is in the midst of continuous learning, as it should be. Deciding how to best unite technical with ethical, cultural, and political considerations, as

we are trying to do here, is part of that learning.

When Henderson argues that

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she is raising an issue that I believe is well enough dealt with by current ethical codes and practitioner understandings in the field. So, to my mind, it signals an issue that is not really an issue, at least not for this debate. I do not believe that the definition of dissociation needs to be extended to avoid over treatment, or inappropriate treatment of items. Sweetnam and Henderson (2022) argue, and I agree the need for conservation treatments to be mindful is reliant on critical self-reflection as much as institutionally recorded information. Still, I fear that codifying cultural, political meanings in the technical way that an agents-types-generic risk framework would require for the quantification of technically well-defined risks is a step in the wrong direction. It shifts the focus from the necessary ethical self-reflection to a technocratic operation.

Henderson Extend the scope 2

Risk management is a forward-looking system, it is not about cataloguing historic damage, whether from insect pests or looting. This forward-looking approach does not diminish concerns about existing loss nor suggest there is no need to mediate it. Whilst a wormhole makes an object vulnerable to physical damage is only an indicator of a past vulnerability to a risk. Dissociation of cultural context is a critically important factor causing future risk. In considering the possibility of future harm, recording the location and nature of values is critical to our operations. Some objects are considered valuable due to their keeping practices whether that is feeding objects and keeping them warm, or specifying access rights, or maintaining motion. These values exist across collections and capture the needs and intentions of creators, users, descendants, and cultural stakeholders. To give an example Manu describes beliefs associated with artefacts that may inhibit conservation practise and concludes that the ‘numinous qualities affected how they are preserved’ (Manu et al 2022 p233). The ability to self-reflect is predicated upon access to and awareness of relevant information. Inequality of power and access are inbuilt with dissociation failures. Collections organisations that hold an item without holding knowledge about how the originators intend it to be used may act in opposition to such use, for example preserving totem poles that are meant to decay. Unequal power increases the risk that future practise will continue to result in loss in value, whether that is a continuous and gradual loss, perhaps by interrupting desired decay or a sudden and significant loss such as removing a piece of graffiti art before realising its social value and subsequently reinstating it (BBC 2013, 2015). Conservation is the preservation of value, whether those practicing conservation remain mindful of this or not. Being unaware of diverse values whilst practising conservation is a risk and real harm cannot be ignored because value is considered to fall outside of technocratic concerns.

Waller Do not extend the scope 2

To my mind, Henderson’s argument regarding ‘dissociation of cultural context contributing to future risk’ is the most powerful argument in favour of including that concept within the technical definition of the agent dissociation. Still, the appropriate avenues for addressing that issue within a collection

management framework are through the collection development and collection use systems. As a critical factor in considering a new acquisition, the ongoing requirements for ensuring that cultural values will be retained must be identified, documented, and accepted as essential requirements for ongoing care.

There has been, and continues to be, tragic loss in value of cultural property caused by separating the property from its most appropriate cultural context. Both current and future value-realizing interaction opportunities are lost. Even more tragically, meanings, the bases for future value realizations, can also be lost. So much current and future loss of value through what is clearly a process of dissociation - how could I possibly believe that dissociation of items from their most appropriate cultural context should not be considered within preventive conservation's understanding of the agent dissociation? There are several reasons, all may seem at first glance to be pedantic, but are based on decades of practical experience in managing conservation, collections, and museums.

Knowledge about items held only in the minds of individuals and not recorded and maintained in an institution's records is not a value at risk. That knowledge is recognized as value that should have been captured and linked to the collection at the time of accessioning, as part of the collection development system. When that has not been done, the value of that knowledge is lost at the time of accessioning, it is recognized as past damage. It must not be confused with future risk which is the focus of the collection risk management system. To think otherwise would make boundaries for quantification irreconcilably vague. Still, retaining these knowledge-related values is a legitimate concern. Preventive conservation should influence, and contribute to improving, the collection development system to avoid such losses. Nevertheless, I do not consider it to be within the scope of the preservation system when that is narrowly defined for assessing and managing risks to a collection. That scope separation is kept clear by defining the agent dissociation as focused on future changes in state leading to loss in value.

Similar reasoning applies to loss of contextually dependent cultural values. Those values might be better maintained through improvements to the collection development system and through improvements in the collection use system. For example, accessioning an item might demand documenting as fully as possible the significance of cultural context within the accessioning process. Avoiding further loss of cultural context value might include providing the item for continued use within its original cultural context. Such appropriate community uses of collection items have been effectively applied (Clavir 2002). Is it best for the preventive conservation function to adopt a role of being the primary activist for promoting use of items? Or would an institution be better served by expecting curators or collection managers to adopt that role, with the support of conservation in promoting safety and preservation during use? It is understandable that preventive conservation professionals striving to achieve a broadest possible social benefit will choose the former. Still, senior museum management would likely, and in my opinion rightly, expect responsibilities to be distributed as suggested in the latter question.

Henderson closing

We have returned to the role of conservators. In my view a shared responsibility can also be a core responsibility. The conservators of manuscripts, or of time-based-media, or steam trains all promote use. Indeed, as I believe hanging a painting in a gallery is a form of use I contend that conservators manage use in almost every aspect of their work without upsetting the institutional apple cart. Furthermore, I believe that use and care are simultaneous functions. Finally, I would argue that that value is better represented by associations than by physical attributes and those associations live on in people even when the objects have been stripped of value by collecting institutions. Knowledge loss is never in the

past if it is alive in the people connected to those objects. It is a present and future risk when institutions fail to reconnect to this knowledge.

Waller closing

I contend that agents should be limited to those things that are within the control of, or can be significantly influenced by, preventive conservation. My perspective is that cultural value separation, as a risk factor, is comparable to issues such as war, climate change, lack of externally perceived value, etc. These important factors affect risk to collections but are too distant from our sphere of significant influence to be instrumental in guiding choices made at the technical collection risk-management level. We must recognize that influence has to be exercised in different ways at twelve levels described as 'leverage points' (Meadows 1999). Adjusting a thermostat is our lowest level leverage point, that of: constants, parameters, numbers. Fostering multi-cultural values into the heritage sector's continual awareness is the highest-level leverage point: The power to transcend paradigms. Using the same risk analysis tool to address issues at those extremely different leverage points cannot lead to success.

An underlying problem in the field today is that we can fall into thinking that preventive conservation is the same as managing risks to collections. That is a necessary but not sufficient aspect of preventive conservation. Preventive conservation is broader and deeper than that simple technocratic goal. Beyond the technical level it must work within the collection use system to optimise collection value delivery across all segments of society including culturally defined segments (Clavir 2002; Balachandran and McHugh 2019), abilities defined segments (Henderson and Lingle 2022), generational segments (Taylor 2013), and others. Broadening the definition of dissociation will only muddy the distinction between the highly technical goal of risk analysis and the broader societal goal of ensuring cultural property sustains and enriches all segments of humanity.

In agreement

We agree there are no simple answers and, because we cannot run independent futures with one decision or another, we will never know what might have been a better choice. We think a consensus decision is unlikely. Instead, both these approaches, and probably many others, will be picked up based on individuals' beliefs of what is best. Our professional responsibility is, as much as possible, to avoid basing decisions on untested beliefs. Instead, we should consider how each alternative could be tested at least through thought experiments.

We can both agree that adding an agent to represent things we don't like in the world is both understandable and a testament to the success of the agents, but any such change must fit with the format to serve the formal risk management purpose that the agents were conceived as delivering. It is possible that an additional agent could be added to cover the broader sense of dissociation, something like 'separation', 'social detachment'. For Waller this is the better way forward and for Henderson expanding the term dissociation is better. We don't agree but we both respect and value our disagreement.

Conclusions

Our increasingly common broader conceptions of conservation help us to practice the respect that ethical codes have urged us towards for decades. The management of the world's resources includes the management of its cultural heritage. Careful and equitable resource extraction and its distribution and management is critical to sustainable shared planet. Such concerns are not limited to industry and

farming. The extraction of resource, whether minerals, crops, or heritage and their unequal distribution is not simply a feature of past colonialism, it is an ongoing current and present threat to sustainable living. Many museums, especially those that claim universal museum status, are extractive and have profited from the uneven distribution of resource. In some cases, it is the direct removal of cultural items, in others it is of materials of construction such as minerals, pigments, or silk, and in others it is about wealth and the resource is to support culture. Transforming extractive industries is critical to sustainable global development and this must involve giving equal weight to the concerns of all participants regardless of their size or location (United Nations 2021 pp 4-5 Villanueva et al 2023). Neither perspective offered in this paper seeks to diminish the importance of this.

By placing this discussion front and centre within the conservation literature, the authors offer insight into decision-making and responsibilities for conservators. Furthermore, by modelling informed and respectful disagreement, we offer a pattern that we hope contributes to sustaining the profession. It is essential that conservators consider their interactions with others and how they contribute to both their own sustainable careers, (Macdonald and Hite 2018) the sustainability of their institutions and the sustainability of the place of their institutions in wider society.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that we live in places that are safe and free of war which creates opportunities for us to disagree and yet remained friends and that this is not available to many people worldwide.

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Agent	Examples of damage
Physical force	Breakage, distortion
Thieves and vandals	Item lost, defaced
Fire	Total loss, soot damage
Water	Distortion, pigments running
Pests	Consumption, soiling
Pollutants	Soiling, tarnishing
Visible, ultraviolet and infrared radiation	Alteration of colors, photo-oxidation
Incorrect temperature	Accelerated chemical reactions, melting
Incorrect relative humidity	Mold growth, corrosion
Dissociation	Server corrupted, missing label

Table 1. Ten agents of change (after CCI (2017)) with examples of kinds of damages caused.

Agent	Type of risk	Generic Risk	Example specific risks
Physical Forces	Rare (once per 100 years or less)	PF-1	PF-1-1 Earthquake causes shelf collapse leading to breakage of tea service. PF-1-2 Earthquake causes tall objects to topple over and break. PF-1-3 Landslide destroys and buries building and contents. Etc.
Physical Forces	Sporadic (an incident every few years or decades)	PF-2	PF-2-1 A drawer of collection items is accidentally dropped resulting in breakage. PF-2-2 Transportation between venues leads to shock, or impact resulting in physical damage. PF-2-3 Painted surface with decayed binder in transit vibrates losing some surface pigment. Etc.
Physical Forces	Continual (ongoing process or occurrences at least once per year.	PF-3	PF-3-1 Wooden floor vibrates when dancing occurs in gallery risking glazed picture. PF-3-2 Gravity causes distortion in poorly supported, non-rigid, non-elastic objects. PF-3-3 Retrieval of items from crowded storage situation causes surface abrasion to items. Etc.

Table 2. Illustration of how the generic risks are further divided into specific risks.