Reconstructing Dead Nonhuman Animals: Motivations for Becoming a Taxidermist

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Abstract
Displays of dead nonhuman animals are a common sight on the walls of many American homes and commercial establishments. Taxidermists are the individuals who preserve and attempt to re-create dead animals, birds, and fish so they can be displayed. Little is known about those employed in the profession, including characteristics of individuals who enter this line of work. Using a qualitative approach to data collection, this exploratory research examined motivations for becoming a taxidermist in Montana. Findings suggest that Montana taxidermists entered the profession for one of five main reasons: an interest in wildlife, a desire to mount their own trophies, a hobby that became a job, the necessity of changing jobs, and miscellaneous motivations.

Keywords
fishing, hunting, Montana, motivations, taxidermists, wildlife

Introduction
Despite a decline in the number of hunters in recent decades (Bergman, 2005; Heberlein, 1991), the demand for trophy nonhuman wild animals remains strong in contemporary American society (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2006a; Bryant, 2004; Kalof & Fitzgerald, 2003). These dead animals are subsequently re-created and preserved as mementos or souvenirs from successful outings. Taxidermists are the individuals that preserve and re-create dead animals, birds, and fish (Cunningham, 1995; Bryant, 1979). The taxidermy process requires excellent craft and artistic skills. As is the case with some other animal-related occupations such as dog catchers (Palmer, 1978) and conservation law enforcement officers (Shelley & Crowe, 2009), scant research has been directed toward the study of those employed in the taxidermy profession.
Analysis of taxidermy as a profession is limited. More generally, however, people’s relationships with both live and dead wild animals have been the focus of social science research. This prior animal related research has examined topics such as wildlife viewing experiences (Smith, Ham, & Weiler, 2011; Knight, 2009; Montag, Patterson, & Freimund, 2005); the meaning of animals in contemporary society and how they are socially constructed (Leong, 2010; Jerolmack, 2008; Herda-Rapp & Goedeke, 2005; Lawson, Lawson, & Leck, 2005; Palmer & Forsyth, 1992), and the meaning and display of taxidermy specimens in society (Hansen, 2010; Marvin, 2010; Madsen-Brooks, 2009; Alberti, 2008; Desmond, 2008; Patchett, 2008; Patchett & Foster, 2008; Poliquin, 2008; Shell, 2004; Simpson, 1999; Bryant & Shoemaker, 1988; Haraway, 1984-1985).

Modern animal studies have examined the ways people use wild animals (Herda-Rapp & Goedeke, 2005), including through their practices of hunting and conservation (Ritvo, 2002, 2004) and sport hunting (Bergman, 2005; Kalof, Fitzgerald, & Baralt, 2004; Peterson, 2004), for example. Such studies also address the sometimes intense conflicts over wildlife in contemporary society (Herda-Rapp & Goedeke, 2005). The present study, with its focus on humans employed in an occupation dealing with dead wild animals (and sometimes domestic animals), represents an important contribution to human animal studies.

Utilizing an interactionist approach, the study attempts to extend our understanding of the taxidermic enterprise by examining the motivations of individuals who have chosen to take up this rather obscure occupation. Important questions are asked about these individuals who preserve and re-create dead animals, including: who are the individuals that work with dead animals, and why did they choose to go into this line of work?

**History of Taxidermy**

Dead animals or parts of animals were preserved for various reasons throughout history (Wintle, 2008). The process of preserving nonhuman animal specimens has evolved during the course of history (Henning, 2007; Greer & Guelke, 2003; Star, 1992). Asma provides a description of early taxidermy:

> In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries hunters brought their prize kills to upholsterers, who sewed the animal skin together and stuffed it with cotton and rags. It was this rather crude form of taxidermy, resulting in some horribly misshapen trophies, that led to the phrase “stuffed animals.” (2001, pp. 9-10)
Some of the earliest taxidermy was associated with science and museums (Alvey, 2007; Andrei, 2005; Schulze-Hagen, Steinheimer, Kinzelbach, & Gasser, 2003; Barrow, 2000; Born, 1998; Star, 1992; Bryant & Shoemaker, 1988; Farber, 1977). Haraway (1984-1985) noted that there was an expansion of taxidermy toward the end of the 19th century. Organizations such as the museum began to represent nature through stories that took the form of taxidermic specimens situated in habitat dioramas.

Describing the development of the activity, Wakeham states that “unlike practices of embalming or tanning, taxidermy developed with a doubled function: namely, the artistic pursuit of imitating nature and the scientific enterprise of collecting and preserving natural history specimens” (2008, p. 9). Bryant & Shoemaker (1988) note that the artistic skills of Carl Akeley and William Hornaday were particularly important in helping them gain renown as taxidermists. These individuals worked for prestigious institutions, Akeley at the American Museum of Natural History (Haraway, 1984-1985) and Hornaday at the U.S. National Museum, which was a part of the Smithsonian Institution (Andrei, 2005). Other prominent individuals who engaged in or were instructed in taxidermy include George Armstrong Custer and Theodore Roosevelt (Barrow, 2000; Bryant & Shoemaker, 1988). Star (1992) notes that U.S. taxidermists became increasingly concerned with techniques of display for specimens during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Methods used by taxidermists have improved tremendously since the period of “stuffed animals” mentioned by Asma (2001). Good taxidermy requires not only knowledge of how to prepare specimens properly for preservation; it also requires knowledge of how animals appear in their natural environments (Grasseni, 1998). Modern taxidermy techniques involve the use of synthetic materials such as plastic, glass, and the practice of freeze-drying (Desmond, 2002; Bryant & Shoemaker, 1988). In some instances, these techniques have been applied to the bodies of dead humans that are preserved through plastination, so that the internal organs can be displayed for educational purposes (Stephens, 2007; Desmond, 2002).

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the era of natural history and the museum, taxidermy was well on its way to becoming a legitimate profession. However, as the 20th century progressed and demand for taxidermic specimens from biologists began to wane, its status was reduced to that of a hobby (Star, 1992). The Society of American Taxidermists was formed in 1881 but was disbanded just two years later in 1883 (Shell, 2004; Star, 1992). Nearly a century later, in 1972, another organization called the National Taxidermy Association was created “to professionalize the field and to disseminate
information on the latest techniques, resulting in heightened standards of realism” (Desmond, 2002, p. 162).

Contemporary Demand for Taxidermy

Dead animals are a common sight on the walls of many American homes. Some homes are decorated with so-called “walls of death,” featuring the display of numerous domestic and/or exotic mounted animals. Dead animal displays are not restricted to homes and are often found in commercial venues such as sporting good stores, as well as hotels, bars, automobile dealerships, department stores, and professional offices (Cain, 2009; Bronner, 2008; Desmond, 2008; Niesel, 1994).

The demand for taxidermy in contemporary society is strong, even though the number of hunters has declined in recent decades (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2006a; Bergman, 2005; Heberlein, 1991). This is most likely due to the popularity of trophy hunting (Bryant, 2004; Kalof & Fitzgerald, 2003). According to Berry, “We possess special animals as a way of impression management” (2008, p. 79). This applies not only to live animals, but also to dead animals that are mounted and displayed because they serve as status symbols (Bryant & Shoemaker, 1988). Describing the symbolic power of animal parts, Brower states, “As trophies, animals bodies figure indexically the success of the hunter, and in a synechdochic relationship certain prized animal parts come to stand in for the whole. Thus, antlers, heads, and tusks can come to stand in for the whole of the animal in symbolizing the kill” (2005, p. 23).

Hunters increasingly desire to preserve the specimens they obtain while hunting. This is in order to preserve memories of successful hunts (Marvin, 2010), as well as to serve as a visible symbol of success and their prowess as a hunter. Bryant provides a description of the motivations and status hierarchy associated with collecting dead animals: “The acquisition of animal trophies is seldom random, but rather a highly systematic quest for prime specimens, usually in an ascending order of uniqueness, increasing challenge, and danger” (2004, p. 4). The search for prime specimens is not of recent origin, either. Haraway (1984-1985) notes that game species were ranked in a hierarchy when taxidermy was developing in the early 20th century.

Taxidermy in Montana

Hunting is a popular recreational activity in Montana (Eliason, 2008; U.S. Department of the Interior, 2006b). It is also an important part of the local culture (Brownell, 1987). Each fall, thousands of resident and nonresident hunters head to the mountains, foothills, and prairies in search of trophy deer,
elk, antelope, moose, bighorn sheep, Rocky Mountain goats, mountain lions, and black bears. Fishing is also a popular recreational activity in Montana (Wright & Sanyal, 1998). In the summer, thousands of resident and nonresident anglers converge on the state’s famous rivers for the world-class trout fishing. Lakes and reservoirs are also popular destinations for anglers and provide for a variety of fishing experiences.

In Montana, no formal instruction or training is required to obtain a taxidermy license. Individuals who want to become a taxidermist fill out a one-page application form and pay a $50 fee for a license to the Enforcement Division of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, which is the agency charged with the licensing and oversight of taxidermists (Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 2010). Montana state game wardens monitor the activities of taxidermists for law enforcement purposes. They conduct periodic inspections of the written records or log books taxidermists are required to keep. These log books provide a record of the wild animals taxidermists have worked on, as well as the names and residences of the hunters who submitted animals.

Theoretical Perspective

This research invoked a symbolic interaction theoretical perspective to study the taxidermist occupation. Symbolic interaction focuses on the experiences of individuals in their daily activities (Shaffir & Pawluch, 2003). When applied to the study of employment, this perspective is concerned with “the experience of work from the point of view of those who engage in it. This has meant looking at how individuals become part of an occupation; how they acquire the skills and knowledge they need to do their job” (Shaffir et al., p. 894). The symbolic interaction perspective helps us understand the meaning of work from the perspective of those employed in a given occupation.

There is a lack of knowledge about the characteristics of taxidermists, as well as their attitudes regarding specific aspects of the occupation. The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify taxidermists’ motivations for entering this line of work. Why do individuals go into the business of preserving and re-creating dead animals? The findings of this research will help us understand who taxidermists are and why they choose this occupation.

Methods

This study took a qualitative approach to data collection. A mail survey was used, and questions were developed to assess the attitudes of taxidermists regarding a variety of aspects of their occupation. The survey contained mostly
open-ended questions designed to elicit information about the job of the taxidermist. Questions used in the survey are located in the Appendix. Names and addresses of licensed taxidermists were obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. The sample consisted of all licensed taxidermists in Montana in 2004 (N = 262). The mail survey was sent to all licensed taxidermists in the state of Montana in February 2005. A total of 44 taxidermists returned the survey, for a response rate of 17%.

To elicit their motivations for choosing this occupation, taxidermists were asked “Why did you decide to become a taxidermist?” (Fowler, 1993). Respondents were allowed to respond in their own words so that data could be obtained in rich detail. This study used interpretive interactionism, which, according to Denzin, refers to “the attempt to make the world of problematic lived experience of ordinary people directly available to the reader. The interactionist interprets these worlds” (1989, p. 7).

To analyze the data, I examined all the responses from the surveys with the intent of identifying common themes regarding motivations for choosing taxidermy as an occupation. Motivational categories were identified according to themes that emerged, and data were placed into these categories. Representative quotes from taxidermists are presented in each category. At the end of each quote, a code number is listed in parentheses (e.g., #34) to distinguish the participants. The age and sex of participants is also provided.

**Findings and Discussion**

As Table 1 reveals, Montana taxidermists ranged in age from 28 to 70 and had a mean age of 49 years. They had an average of 20 years experience practicing taxidermy. The average age at which they decided to become a taxidermist was nearly 28 years old.

Table 2 provides additional demographic data. Taxidermy in Montana is a male-dominated occupation. Of the taxidermists, 88% were male, and 12% were female. Historical and contemporary studies (Madsen-Brooks, 2009;
Desmond, 2008; Barrow, 2000) also suggest that taxidermy is, and has been, a male-dominated activity at the national level as well. Most of the individuals who practice taxidermy are hunters, and most hunters are male, so the fact that the majority of taxidermists are male should not come as a surprise.

In terms of education, 33% were high school graduates, 23% had completed some college, and 37% had a BS degree or higher. A graduate degree

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was held by 12%. Ninety-three percent of taxidermists were married. There was wide variation in terms of income. Total household incomes of less than $35,000 were reported by 28%; 48% had incomes between $35,000 and $74,999; and 25% had incomes of $75,000 or more. In terms of race, almost 98% of the taxidermists were white, and 2% were Native American. This is consistent with the general population of Montana, which is mostly white.

To elicit information about their career choice, taxidermists were asked to describe their motivations for going into taxidermy. Responses to the question “Why did you decide to become a taxidermist?” fell into five categories, including interest in wildlife, a desire to mount their own trophies, a hobby that became a job, the necessity of changing jobs, and miscellaneous reasons. While the survey did not ask how they were trained as a taxidermist, 20 of the 44 taxidermists who responded described how they learned the trade. Eight taxidermists (40%) said they were self-taught, seven (35%) said they attended taxidermy school to learn the trade, three (15%) learned from another taxidermist, and two (10%) learned from a mail study course. Apprenticeship, or learning the art of taxidermy from those already experienced in the craft, was frequently mentioned as valuable experience to those pursuing a career in the field. A consistent theme across all the response categories was that no matter how they were initially trained in the craft, taxidermists were constantly learning and improving their techniques throughout their career.

Interest in Wildlife

While the use of animals by humans for dietary and other purposes in the United States has increasingly been contested in recent decades (Palmer et al., 1992), the practice and culture of hunting wild animals remains strong in Montana (Eliason, 2008; U.S. Department of the Interior, 2006b). Research indicates that profound experiences with wildlife can significantly influence peoples’ attitudes toward wild animals (Smith et al., 2011). Evidence suggests that taxidermists have experiences with wildlife that favorably predispose them toward the taxidermy occupation. Providing historical perspective about Carl Akeley and how he entered the taxidermy profession, Alvey states that Akeley “became fascinated with taxidermy at an early age after a trip to a small museum in Rochester, and taught himself the basics with the help of a how-to pamphlet, showing early skill stuffing a pet canary for a neighbor” (2007, p. 25). It has been noted that Akeley was also a hunter (Haraway, 1984-1985). William T. Hornaday was characterized as “a lifelong hunter, collector and wildlife lover” (Shell, 2004, p. 91).

Most of the taxidermists were avid hunters and anglers and professed a love of the outdoors, along with a fascination with wildlife. Within this motivational
category there were several distinct variations in terms of individuals’ particular interest in wildlife. For example, some taxidermists were very specific in their remarks and said they entered the occupation because of a direct interest in working with animals. Fascination with wildlife in general, and with the art of taxidermy in particular, were given as primary motivations by others. The processes of reproduction and re-creation of animals were also given as reasons for going into taxidermy. In a rather provocative description of the taxidermic process and its relation to art, Bryant and Shoemaker state that the job of taxidermist “is unique in that it is a creative attempt to make nature, in the form of dead animals, imitate art, in the shape of organic statuary, rather than art imitating nature” (1988, p. 195).

The following comments suggest that for some individuals the occupation of taxidermist complemented their outdoor-recreation-centered lifestyle and interests that revolved around hunting and fishing activities, and at the same time allowed them to engage in a challenging career that they found enjoyable:

It stemmed from a love for the outdoors and being an avid hunter and fisherman…. I attended an 8 week school which gave me enough basic information to start a business. (#1, no age or sex provided)

I had an interest in hunting and the outdoors, then an interest in taxidermy…. I don’t know if training is ever complete. A person can learn the basics in a few months. It seems like you are always learning new things. (#2, 28-year-old male)

I enjoy working with animals and making them life-like…. Very little training is required. Most courses are 3 months long. I spent 2 years as an apprentice at Jonas Bros. in Denver to learn my skill. (#3, 59-year-old male)

I have been fascinated [with] taxidermy forever. My prior job was way too dangerous so I said what the hell, let’s try it…. In Montana there is no training required. Even though I paid a lot of money to go to a reputable school, I believe it should remain the same. You get a good name and clientele by learning and working hard. The others weed themselves out. (#4, 33-year-old male)

I have a strong fascination with wildlife. Taxidermy is hands on preservation of wildlife…. I took a 2 month intensive training course in Helena at the Montana School of Taxidermy. (#5, 32-year-old male)

I enjoy working with animals, re-creating and preserving their uniqueness and beauty. It takes lots of practice. I was self-taught through books and trial and error. (#6, 54-year-old male)

I was very interested in preserving specimens, and always art oriented. I hunted and fished all my life, and wanted to help people further enjoy their outdoor experiences through taxidermy…. Some of the schools are teaching students very well. Taxidermy is an ongoing learning experience, but after schooling it seems to take a full-time year
to really become a viable taxidermist— with a great deal of “extra-time” devoted to visual study and practical experience. (#7, 57-year-old male)

A Desire to Mount Their Own Trophies

According to Marvin, “the taxidermed mount is only a superficial animal; it is, literally, only skin deep, but that surface must be crafted to convey a sense of the whole. In this sense a mount is a simulacrum . . . [that] attempts to convey those proper qualities of the living and original animal, but it can never be more than an appearance” (2010, p. 114). In the quest to make dead animals appear lifelike, the practice of taxidermy is simultaneously a craft and an art (Star, 1992; Bryant & Shoemaker, 1988). Recognizing it as a worthwhile skill for young individuals to develop, the Boy Scouts of America organization established a taxidermy merit badge in 1911, and by the time it was discontinued in 1954 scouts had earned a total of 10,344 of these merit badges (Jordan, 2010; Bryant & Shoemaker, 1988).

Some of the individuals in the study entered taxidermy as the result of a desire to mount their own trophies. Marvin (2010) notes that most hunters lack the artistic and craft skills to mount their own trophies, so they end up taking their animals to a professional taxidermist. However, it can be expensive to get specimens mounted, with costs ranging from several hundred dollars for shoulder mounts of deer to thousands of dollars for full body mounts of big game animals. Such costs can pose a severe challenge for many Montana residents, given the fact that the state’s salaries are among the lowest in the United States (Fritz, 2002; Malone, Roeder, & Lang, 1991). For some taxidermists this factor served as the impetus to enter the profession. The following comments from a 67-year-old male reveal that economic concerns were responsible for his decision to engage in the practice of taxidermy:

I had 3 bears and 1 deer, 1 grouse mounted and the price[s] taxidermists charged were more than I could afford and still support our family. So I decided to do it myself. . . . Taxidermy is fairly easy, but to take animals, birds, and fish and make them appear live is what taxidermy is. I would say five years full time, or with taxidermy school training I would say three years. (#8)

Comments from other taxidermists also revealed a desire to mount their own trophies and describe how these individuals entered the occupation:

I am a[n] avid fisherman. Before I became a taxidermist I . . . had over 12 fish mounted. One of my friends who took a taxidermy course on fish mounting enlightened me to do them for myself. . . . There is not really too much training. If a person gets some
good videos on how to mount fish and has patience you could get started immediately. It helps to know fellow taxidermists. (#9, 49-year-old male)

I started out only doing my own animals, and as I got better I started getting paying jobs…. Not much [training] is required, but if you learn from a good wildlife artist your work will be that much better, and experience is everything. I only mount mammals. (#10, 36-year-old male)

**A Hobby That Became a Job**

With respect to taxidermy, Bryant and Shoemaker state that “[a]s a social identity, it may either be an occupation or avocation, or in some instances, both” (1988, p. 195). In a description of the famous 19th-century taxidermist/naturalist Martha Maxwell, Madsen-Brooks says, “She imagined her hobby might become a career, but many obstacles stood in her way, including, perhaps, the way she wished to represent the natural world” (2009, p. 15).

Most individuals dabble in activities or hobbies they enjoy during their leisure time, and sometimes these hobbies wind up turning into full-fledged employment opportunities. This proved to be the case for some taxidermists in the study, where taxidermy began as a personal hobby but eventually progressed to a career as they gained experience and became increasingly proficient at the activity. For some individuals, taxidermy is a challenging and rewarding career in that it provides opportunities to improve and hone their skills constantly in the quest to make dead animals appear lifelike. The following comments reveal that some individuals initially began practicing taxidermy as a hobby and illustrate how it eventually transformed into an occupational enterprise:

At first it was a hobby and I became efficient. And people liked what I do. I love the outdoors, and its tranquility…. The amount of training depends on the person. For me, visual and hands on work is how I learn. So with that in mind I basically self taught along with video purchases…. I do elk, deer, small mammals-shoulder mounts. I used to do birds, but they were very messy: oily. I have a small shop and I am limited to the size of projects I have to work on. Fish are in the future, when I build a bigger shop. (#11, 28-year-old male)

[It] mostly started as a hobby and to mount animals for myself. I took a mail order course and read books to get started. [I] later took another mail order course. You can self teach yourself. Trial and error, also later on [I] got some tips from another taxidermist. (#12, 56-year-old female)

I’m a hunter and outdoorsman, it was an interesting hobby at the time and now a profession. [I enjoy] bringing animals and birds back to life, preserving something that might otherwise go to waste. I learned from a correspondence course. [It took] many years of practice to be good at it. I’m self taught. (#13, 64-year-old male)
The Necessity of Changing Jobs

As previously mentioned, in general, jobs in Montana have low salaries compared to those in other states (Fritz, 2002; Malone et al., 1991). This problem is compounded when one considers that many communities in rural Montana have limited employment opportunities for residents, and historically many of the better paying occupations have been associated with natural resource extraction industries such as mining and logging (Fritz, 2002; Malone et al., 1991).

Some taxidermists entered the profession because of a variety of unfortunate and unanticipated employment issues. In particular, loss of a job in another field, and difficulty obtaining employment in their chosen field of study were given as reasons by some taxidermists for entering the profession. Given that rural Montana has abundant fish and wildlife populations, and hunting and fishing are popular recreational activities, taxidermy represented a viable occupational alternative to other careers for some of these individuals. The following comments illustrate the situations these individuals encountered that led them to pursue a career in taxidermy:

The lumber mill I worked for closed down, I was out of work along with 75 other men so I chose to go to taxidermy school to try to make a living out of my hobbies. Hunting and fishing.... I went to a 13 week school, but you never quit learning. (#14, 46-year-old male)

I went for a biology degree and had a hard time finding a job. So [I] decided to try taxidermy.... I spent 2 months in taxidermy school and got a job where I gained the experience to become a taxidermist. (#15, 32-year-old female)

Right out of college there were no jobs available in my major-wildlife biology. I believe I was 28 or thereabout. There’s a romanticism about taxidermy or nearly every job working with wildlife. I saw it in college when the “wildlifers” would do almost anything including work for free for wildlife agencies to get their foot in the door so to speak. Example-work at check points in hunting season or for Ducks Unlimited. (#16, 61-year-old male)

For other individuals, the decision to go into taxidermy came about because of the necessity of changing jobs for health reasons. A couple of individuals indicated they chose to become taxidermists because of physical decline or injuries that precluded them from continuing with more strenuous lines of work. For example, a forty-nine-year-old male described how he was compelled to change jobs for physical reasons:
I have been a carpenter/contractor most of my life and my body is wearing out. I need to do something and taxidermy is easier on my knees and shoulders and I like doing it. I am self taught. I have known several taxidermists over many years and I have many hours of watching and helping them. . . . I specialize in fish and I also do horn mounts and Europeans. (#17)

In another case, a forty-two-year-old male experienced an injury and described how taxidermy was a good fit, given the circumstances surrounding his situation:

[I] had an injury to my knee, and had always been interested in [taxidermy]. So [I] thought it might work out rehabbing and going to school. . . . The school is a very small part. It teaches only the basics. The training and learning never end, [there are] always new products to use and try, new techniques and processes. (#18)

**Miscellaneous Reasons**

No matter what their specific motivation may have been for entering the profession, taxidermists engage in creative endeavors that contribute to our understanding and enjoyment of animals. In contrast to the viewing experience of live animals in natural settings or zoos, the unique function of taxidermy, according to Desmond, is that “[t]axidermy scenes extract, value, and validate key experiences of animal life and freeze them forever for our contemplation, a privileged form of vision usually unavailable in the wild” (2008, p. 359).

The final category included a variety of miscellaneous reasons for entering taxidermy. For example, sometimes entry into the occupation was accomplished through being introduced to it by a family member or friend. In other circumstances individuals were attracted to the practice because of the inducement of income or extra income it could provide. And finally, some individuals reported they were drawn to taxidermy because of general enjoyment of the activity. Comments from taxidermists provide perspective on the mixed motivations for entering the profession that comprise this diverse category:

Doing taxidermy, I have learned a lot about anatomy. I like to sculpt and paint and work with different mediums. I get satisfaction in using every part of a harvested animal and preserving, if you will, the animal. My husband introduced me to taxidermy and I really enjoy it. (#19, 42-year-old female)

My best friend needed help in her taxidermy shop. (#20, 42-year-old female)
For an additional income activity…. I actually only do skull mounts mostly-European mounts. I use dermestid beetles to clean skulls, then whiten. It would take me 2 months to train people in what I do. (#21, 43-year-old male)

[Out of] necessity. I was not living at home with my parents. I was still in high school, I had to make money for rent, etc…. It took 3 or 4 years to become proficient enough to mount customers’ trophies (on the job training). (#22, no age provided, male)

Because I like doing it…. I taught myself…. I only do skull work or European mounts. I work with deer, elk, antelope, buffalo, raccoons, coyote, fox, beavers, badgers. (#23, 36-year-old male)

Conclusion

The findings of this exploratory study suggest that while individuals in Montana go into taxidermy for a variety of reasons, most taxidermists have an interest in wildlife and enjoy outdoor activities such as hunting and fishing. In some instances individuals begin practicing taxidermy as a hobby, but it eventually progresses into a job as they become more proficient with the activity. In other instances, individuals enter taxidermy when other employment options either don’t exist or are not feasible for their situations.

Despite declining hunter numbers in the United States and the fact that some have speculated that hunting is facing serious obstacles in contemporary society (Bergman, 2005; Heberlein, 1991), the work of taxidermists is still in demand by hunters and anglers who desire to preserve specimens from their successful recreational outings. Bryant and Shoemaker state, “The mounted game head has traditionally had ‘macho’ value and social status symbolism as trophy of the hunt or memento of the journey” (1988, p. 202). Many hunters and anglers like to have a tangible object or souvenir that serves as a visible reminder of their hunting or fishing experience.

This study has illuminated some of the personal, social, and contextual factors motivating Montana taxidermists. However, additional research is needed to further our understanding of the taxidermy occupation. For example, the present study focused on Montana taxidermists. To extend our understanding of the taxidermy occupation, studies of taxidermists need to be carried out in other states as well as other nations. The potential for regional variation exists, and international data on motivations for entering the profession would provide opportunities for comparative analyses of this occupation.

Future studies should also examine occupational satisfaction among taxidermists. Do taxidermists enjoy their work and find it fulfilling? Studies could also focus on workload and salary issues of taxidermists in contemporary society. Has the recent global economic crisis affected the ability or willingness
of people to get animals mounted? Do taxidermists have enough business and earn enough money to survive? Or are taxidermists forced to take on additional employment in order to make ends meet?

Ethnographic studies of the procedures employed by taxidermists in the course of their work would be very informative about the nature of the occupation. Studies of this sort would also be well poised to examine deviance in the taxidermy industry. The illegal killing or poaching of trophy animals is a serious problem in Montana (Curtis, 2002) and other Western states. Research should examine the extent to which taxidermists engage in criminal acts by accepting wild animals who have been taken illegally.

In addition to those who preserve and re-create animals, researchers should examine the motivations of individuals who collect taxidermic specimens. Studies could focus on the social psychological motivations of individuals who collect dead animals. Quantitative or qualitative studies of this sort would extend our understanding of collecting and why people collect things (McIntosh & Schmeichel, 2004; Blom, 2002). It is hoped that this study will generate further scholarly interest in these topics by scholars interested in the taxidermy enterprise.

References


Appendix: Taxidermy Survey Questions

For how many years have you practiced taxidermy?
At what age did you decide to become a taxidermist?
Why did you decide to become a taxidermist?
How much training is required to become a taxidermist?
What species do you mount (animals, birds, fish)?
Why are trophy mounts so valued by hunters?
Are most of the animals you work on trophy size?
Other than for trophy purposes, why do hunters decide to have an animal mounted?
Do you consider yourself to be an artist?
What is your favorite animal to mount? Why?
What is your least favorite animal to mount? Why?
Do you ever get injured on the job?
Is it difficult to keep up with the workload?
What is the busiest time of the year for you?
How do you obtain clients?
How important is a taxidermist’s reputation in terms of obtaining clients?
Do clients ever become upset because of dissatisfaction with a particular mount? If yes, how do you deal with these situations?
Do hunters try to get illegally taken wildlife mounted? Describe.
How does the state (Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks) monitor the activities of taxidermists?
Occupational deviance occurs in every job/profession. What are some of the ways in which taxidermists violate taxidermy laws?
How much competition for clients is there among taxidermists?
What are some of the important problems or issues the taxidermy industry is facing?
Are you concerned that hunting might be eliminated at some point in the future?
How satisfying is the job of taxidermist?
What is the best part of the job?
What is the worst part of the job?
If you had it to do over again, would you choose to become a taxidermist? Why/why not?
How stressful is the job of taxidermist?
What types of activities do you participate in during your free time?
What is your age? ___ Years
What is your sex?
1. Male
2. Female
What is the highest amount of education you have completed?
1. Some high school (not a graduate)
2. High school graduate
3. Some college
4. BS/BA degree
5. Graduate work
6. Graduate degree
What is your marital status?
1. Married
2. Single (never been married)
3. Separated
4. Divorced
5. Widowed
Which of the following broad categories did your total household income fall into before taxes for the year 2003?
1 $14,999 or less
2 $15,000-$24,999
3 $25,000-$34,999
4 $35,000-$49,999
5 $50,000-$74,999
6 $75,000 or more

What is your race/ethnicity?
1 White
2 Black
3 Hispanic
4 Native American
5 Asian/Pacific Islander
6 Other

I would like to discuss taxidermy practices in more depth. I’m interested in talking with some of the individuals in this study to find out their opinions and feelings about taxidermy-related issues. Would you be willing to participate in a short telephone interview with the researcher?
1 Yes
2 No

If Yes, please provide the telephone number where you can be reached in the space provided, and list the best time to contact you.
Telephone Number:
Your FIRST NAME Only:
Best time to contact you: Between __ a.m./p.m. and __ a.m./p.m.