Archival Research Methods

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Objectives

• Introduce key research studies and methodological approaches in Archival Science and Archival Studies

• Be able to define and discuss concepts that are central to Archival Science

• Be able to identify and demonstrate how different methodologies and research designs can be employed within Archival Science and Archival Studies more broadly, especially in order to investigate topics relating to central concepts
Key Archival Concepts

- Record
- Recordkeeping
- Archive/Archives
- Evidence
- Accountability
- Memory
Traditional Archival Science Paradigm within which Archival Research was Framed

• “studies the characteristics of records in their social and cultural contexts and how they are created, used, selected and transferred through time”

• is based around historical as well as professional practice-based concerns, principles and techniques, especially today the implications of a digital world for records and archives

• predominantly applies survey, case study, historiographical and bibliographical methods

BUT

• new research impetus as a result of growing number of archival faculty and doctoral students

• research foci and methodological approaches are being broadened to respond to and interface with disciplinary, trans-disciplinary, and other professions’ studies of topics relevant to archival ideas, roles and interests (i.e., Archival Studies)
Questioning the Traditional Paradigm

• **Research questions from archival practice:**
  • What is the same, and what is different between diverse types of information and cultural resources (e.g., a manuscript, a record, a newspaper, a book, and a website) and their management requirements?
  • What is the same, and what is different between an original and a digitized copy of a primary source such as a record or a manuscript?
  • In what ways do creator and user practices remain the same or take on different characteristics in the digital world?
  • Which professional principles remain applicable and which need to be re-thought?
  • What should be best practices for archival appraisal, description/metadata development, preservation, reference and outreach, and to what extent can these be standardized, even automated?
  • How should archival policy best be formulated?
  • How should metadata be managed and preserved?
  • How to address terminological overlap and confusion?
Questioning the Traditional Paradigm

• Emergence of the data and digital curation fields:
  • What are effective and appropriate cyberinfrastructure mechanisms for identifying, validating, describing, preserving, declassifying, and curating digital documentation and data?
  • Can archival ideas and practices help?
  • What role do records and archives play in the conduct of science?
  • How do data and records creators think about and use their data/records?
  • What might be secondary uses for those materials? (which materials should be retained and in what ways might they need to be manipulated in the future?)
Questioning the Traditional Paradigm

• Calls for a major reconsideration of the nature and role of the archive and of traditional archival theory and practices in light of post-modern and post-colonial challenges from scholars in various arts, humanities and social science fields:
  • How do records and archives support individual, collective and national identity formation and assignment?
  • How are records and archives implicated in dominant power structures? In colonization?
  • What is the nature of the post-colonial archive?
  • What role have records and archives played/could they play in supporting marginalization, exclusion, oppression, empowerment and reconciliation?
  • How can the traditional archival paradigm be pluralized?
Archival Studies

• Occupies a broad, disciplinarily and methodologically diverse intellectual territory that addresses located at various nexuses between:

  – *texts* (regardless of their media and format) that serve to record, document, narrate, educate, and entertain;
  – *axiomatic constructs* such as evidence, memory, culture, identity, accountability, trust, ethics, spacetime, enterprise, and power relations;
  – *processes* such as testifying, remembering, forgetting, representing, interpreting, investigating, adjudicating, storytelling, and believing;
  – *technologies* for communicating, recording, creating, disseminating, retrieving, socializing, monitoring, and controlling; and
  – *structures and surrogates* that summarize, represent, and interpret information content, contexts, behaviors, and requirements
Emergent Archival Research

• Increasingly collaborative across institutions, fields, and academy/practice, as well as internationally

• Expands contemplation of societal motivations and implications as well as recordkeeping processes and practices

• Employs, repurposes, and adapts additional positivist/interpretivist and quantitative/qualitative methods from an unusually diverse range of fields including:

  – Diplomatic science and legal theory (e.g., contemporary archival diplomatics, Critical Race Theory, digital forensics)
  – Business Administration and Computer Science (e.g., business process analysis and metadata modeling)
  – Anthropology and cultural studies (e.g., ethnography, actor-network theory)
  – Literature and critical studies (genre theory, rhetorical and narrative analyses, textual analyses, postmodern and postcolonial analyses)
  – Library and Information Science (e.g., bibliometrics, empirical instantiation)
Phases in the Life Cycle of Records

- Creation
- Capture
- Storage and maintenance
- Use
- Disposal
The DCC Curation Lifecycle Model

http://www.dcc.ac.uk/docs/publications/DCCLifecycle.pdf)
The Records Continuum (Upward)
Which method(s) are best suited to address different kinds of questions?
Theory-building

• **Definition:** “Systematic building and exposition of new theory, drawing on existing theories, concepts and models; observation; scholarly communication; data derived from other methods; and characterized by reflection, deep thought and a process of gestation of ideas

• **Application in archival research:** Reflection upon and augmentation of archival theory and development of new theories and theoretical models

• **Example:** Records continuum theory (Upward, applying structuration theory, which recognizes the interplay of both structures and human agency)
Diplomatics

• **Definition:** A body of techniques, theories, and principles for analyzing the form, function and genesis of documents, with a particular view to establishing the authenticity (lineage related to legal science, philology and historiography)

• **Application in archival research:** Analysis of changes and continuities in document forms over time. Contemporary archival diplomatics

• **Examples:** Examination of the authenticity of historical charters, manuscripts, photographs; InterPARES Project (identification of ideal record types and actual manifestations in digital systems → requirements for ensuring and assessing reliability and authenticity in records creation and preservation)
Grounded Theory Development

• **Definition:** “Built from the ground upwards,” this method is concerned with discovering concepts and hypotheses and developing theory directly from data that is collected from the field and provides relevant and interesting cases for analysis.

• **Applications in archival research:** Exploratory research where little is known about a particular situation or phenomenon.

• **Examples:** Pittsburgh Project, InterPARES Project, ancient recordkeeping and business practices, e.g., accounting.
Recordkeeping and Archival Systems Analysis

• **Definition:** Analysis and evaluation of activities, processes, and functions in complex institutional, human and technological systems

• **Application in archival research:** Functional, business, and workflow analysis in recordkeeping; building or adapting systems to meet electronic recordkeeping and archival requirements; identifying how records are created and used within recordkeeping systems

• **Examples:** *DIRKS* (National Archives of Australia), Indiana University Electronic Records Project, macroappraisal (Cook, National Library and Archives of Canada), historical distribution networks for manuscripts and book
Model Building

• **Definition:** Use of formal activity, entity-relationship, concept, role and data modeling techniques in iterative, exploratory processes, enabling precise description and structuring of functions, processes, information flows, concepts, etc. of records, archives and metadata in their societal, business and documentary contexts.

• **Application in archival research:** Analyzing recordkeeping and archival practices/workflow; metadata schema analysis; developing conceptual/theoretical models.

• **Examples:** InterPARES activity models; MADRAS; records continuum model, RKMS.
Systems Design and Development
Prototyping

• **Definition:** “has been referred to as ... a developmental and engineering type of research ... development is always associated with exploration, advanced application and operationalization of theory”

• **Application in archival research:** Developing a prototype or demonstration or working version of a system as proof of concept or as the basis of ongoing research

• **Examples:** The Clever Recordkeeping Metadata Project (metadata broker), MADRAS (metadata registry and analysis system), Online Archive of California
Empirical Instantiation

- **Definition:** Systematic use of examples to populate models in order to test their validity, and highlight areas for further investigation and development. Often used in conjunction with model building and systems analysis, design and development methods.

- **Examples:** RKMS, InterPARES preservation models and MADRAS, Clever Recordkeeping Metadata Project
Ethnographic Approaches

• Includes ethnography of recordkeeping; archival ethnography; ethnography of the archive; autoethnography

• **Definition of ethnography:** Systematic contextual and reflexive description of individual cultures and practices. The goal is to understand the insider’s (*emic*) view of his/her world

• **Applications in archival research:** In-depth studies of recordkeeping and archival practices, historically and contemporarily in different national, cultural, governance, institutional and personal contexts

• **Examples:** Recordkeeping and radiology (Yakel); Dutch colonial archival practices in the East Indies (Stoler); scientific recordkeeping practices (Shankar); film preservation decision-making (Gracy); archival reference (Trace); community partnership research (Evans et al.)