Choice is not a Choice

The keeper rationale fails as science

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Introduction

A potentially volatile mix of imperative, complexity, and contention has earned appraisal a prominent place in archival literature. Much has been written about theory, practice, and criteria, with factions debating the virtues and defects of provenance, informational value, intrinsic value, representation, and reappraisal. However, these discussions – characterized by Duranti (1994) as questions of methodology rather than theory - obscure an underlying philosophical divide regarding the appropriate role of the archivist in appraisal. One side regards appraisal as an inappropriate attribution of value that shirks responsibility for records entrusted to the archive's care. The opposition defines appraisal by archivists as a core function – essential for optimal application of finite resources in service of duty.

Despite this fundamental disagreement, there are some areas of consensus from which to begin: archives are incapable of keeping every record created by society, and archivists are professionals with duties to perform. From these common points I believe an argument can be made that participatory appraisal by archivists more appropriately fulfils their duties than earnest stewardship of archival nature does.

Archival Limitations

Abundance has been a byword of the discipline since at least as early as the Prussian empire, which pioneered appraisal through provenance in response to the proliferation of bureaucracies and their records between the World Wars (Menne-Haritz, 1994). Whether custodians (Jenkinson, 1922), champions of scholarship (Schellenberg, 1956), instigators (Bearman, 1995), absolutists (McRanor, 1996), documentarians (Cox, 1994), or self-proclaimed realists (Rapport, 1984) scholars agree that the combination of voluminous records and limited resources dictates the exclusion of some records from the shelter of archival preservation.

In addition, Bearman (1989) contends that realties more elementary than scarce resources render aspirations toward universal documentation a fool's errand. He describes the potential documentary universe as possessing boundless possibilities; every person, in the context of every activity and in diverse media, creates and destroys thousands of records that never enter the consciousness of archival repositories. This autonomous creation and destruction means that even the most diligent collection policies are capable of preserving only an infinitesimal percentage of the documentary universe. In this context, appraisal must be an act of choosing – among records

transferred to repository custody and among the potential records to be directed to the archives.

By themselves, however, abundance of records and finite resources fail to resolve the tension between custodianship and archival appraisal. Both sides contend their approaches can deal with records bulk. The continuum model (McKemmish, 1997) and other types of functional analysis are designed to reduce bulk by selectively directing records to the archive. Jenkinson's (1922) manual of archive administration mandates preservation of archives "en bloc" even though the book began as a schema for managing the "impossibly bulky War Archives" (p. 21).

An argument for appraisal requires an examination of the other area of agreement – professionalism.

Archivist as Professional

Ortega y Gasset (1961) wrote that professions arise from society's identification of an essential, communally beneficial task and the need for practitioners dedicated to it. Society entrusts a profession with the responsibility of fulfilling the task on behalf of all, and professional status is the way in which society regulates standard of service and ethical exercise of authority. Service to society, formal academic training,

professional associations, and codes of ethics (Preer, 2008) are the hallmarks of professionalism.

Theorists throughout the spectrum of beliefs (Jenkinson 1922, Cox 2004, Benedict 1984) speak of duty and responsibility and stress the importance of standards and education. Professional associations like the Society of American Archivists (SAA), the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA), the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA), and the principal professional organization for archivists in the United Kingdom and Ireland, the Archives and Records Association (ARA) institutionalize those characteristics. ACA's web site declares

> The Association of Canadian Archivists envisions a dynamic, well educated, and well informed information profession, strategically positioned to ensure: the preservation and accessibility of Canada's information resources and its documentary heritage; the public's appreciation of those resources and that heritage; and the role of the Canadian archival community in its preservation and accessibility (http://archivists.ca/content/about-us).

Cynics might dismiss such a statement as cheerleadering for the discipline, but through advocacy combined with service emphasis, educational standards, and codes of ethics or conduct to which

it members must adhere, professional associations imbue their individual members with competence, integrity and accountability.

However professional stature does more than assure society or establish public faith;

> the development and publication of a code of ethics is an exercise in normative ethics wherein moral reasoning is used to arrive at a set of guidelines by which professional activities can be both guided and judged (Dingwall, 2004, p. 12).

Professionalism also instills confidence in professionals. Standards like codes of ethics provide a framework for the responsible fulfillment of duty.

If there is agreement that society has entrusted archivists with the professional responsibility of preserving records of enduring or continuing value (http://www.archives.org.uk/resources/ARA%20Code%20of%20Conduct.pdf, http://www.archivists.org.au/about/what-is-an-archivist, http://www.archivists.org/governance/handbook/app_ethics.asp, http://archivists.ca/_content/code-ethics) the philosophical divide regarding appraisal appears to be about how to apply professional training and standards to fulfill that duty.

Art or Science?

The question of whether archival work is an art of a science may seem merely academic, but it is loaded with practical significance. It is really a question of how the discipline identifies appropriate professional practices, which are the operational tools archivists employ to fulfill their societal duty. Art and science are approaches by which premises are derived, and practices are built on those premises. Because professionalism requires responsible behavior, the process for crafting practice also must be responsible.

Art applies skill motivated by creativity (Lechner, 1991), which is an amorphous quality that is neither observable nor measurable. Conversely, science acquires knowledge through observation (Patten, 2009). It intends to infer valid, reliable predictions about relationships between variables. If an archivist takes action A with archives B in situation C what will be the outcome? Through measurement and the capacity for replicability, science affords objective justification for the premise that a given practice will effectively and responsibly satisfy professional duty. Premises derived through art are incapable of objective justification because the artistic process is internal and informed by a subjective aesthetic. Objective justification is necessary for accountability, which

is a corollary of responsibility, and because accountability is unattainable without objective, external assessment, science is better equipped than art to provide rational, effective, examinable practices that responsibly satisfy professional duty.

Perhaps for these reasons, the field identifies itself as a science. Many archivists obtain post-graduate degrees in the academic discipline called library science (http://www2.archivists.org/profession). While contemplating the question of art or science in his book *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* Boles (2005) concluded that archival work is primarily science that occasionally is enhanced by intuition and artistry. In an issue of *Archivaria*, Couture (2005) contributed three articles under the umbrella of Quebec's Perspective on Archival Science. The journal that publisher Springer bills as "the only independent, international, peer-reviewed journal on archival science, covering all aspects of theory, methodology and practice, with appropriate attention to the non-anglophone world" (http://www.springer.com/new+%26+forthcoming+titles+(default)/journal/10502) is called *Archival Science*.

If archival work is a science, it follows that the processes by which records become archives should be scientific. Of the two sides of the selection debate – theorists and

practitioners – the latter are more inclined to approach appraisal scientifically. Scholars who eschew appraisal by archivists as attribution of value that affronts archival nature derive their premises through induction. Science deduces from observation, and observation requires an action to be observed.

Deduction and Induction

Deduction and induction are both forms of argument which draw inferences from empirical observation, but where deduction draws its conclusions by testing relationships between variables induction draws broad conclusions from specific observations.

Deduction begins with a hypothesis, tests it through measurable observations, and infers probable outcomes for future interaction of the variables in comparable circumstances (Bokulich, 2003). Deduction asserts that one can only know what has been tested, and it recognizes that any inferences drawn through testing, though reasonable, are imperfect. It is an iterative process in which continuing experimentation serves the development of theory by strengthening or challenging hypotheses.

In contrast induction is a "nondemonstrative argument, in which the truth of premises, while not entailing the truth of the conclusion, purports to be a good reason for belief in it"

(Black, 2006, p. 636). Induction makes inferences from observed to unobserved matters of fact; it draws broad conclusions from specific facts or phenomena; it says true premises lead to true conclusions.

Black (2006) summarized "the celebrated problem of induction, which still lacks any generally accepted solution", (p. 636) as a three-pronged objection of justification, comparison, and analysis. The justification objection asks why it is reasonable to accept inductive conclusions as true. The comparative and analytical objections stem from the fact that "An inductive argument accepted by one judge may be rejected, on good grounds, by another, equally competent judge; supposedly sound arguments from different sets of true premises may yield opposed conclusions" (p. 639). If so, induction offers no criteria to determine why one conclusion may be preferable to another or why is it more worthy of rational trust.

Popper (1953) argued that acting according to universal truths formulated from the facts of specific observations is both irrational and illogical. Induction deals in absolutes; and absolutes are incapable of being proved. No certainty exists that because things have been a certain way that they will continue to be or should be that way. "Which theory should we prefer for practical action, from a rational point of view? …We

should prefer the best tested theory as a basis for action" (¶ 72).

For purposes of this discussion it may be instructive to rephrase Popper's statement in terms of *behavior* rather than *action* since one side of the appraisal debate advocates what could be characterized as inaction. Their contention is that value attribution appraisal is inappropriate professional behavior. In the following section I will argue the contrary: that the archivist as disinterested keeper can no longer be justified as responsible professional behavior because it relies on archival science practices based on theory derived via unscientific means.

Keeper or Appraiser?

Hilary Jenkinson (1922) famously enumerated the archivist's primary duty as safeguarding the archives in his custody. The selection of materials to be transferred into custody belongs to the purview of others: the officials who dictate which repository is responsible for the archives of which organization and the archives' creator who is "the sole agent for the selection and destruction of his own documents" (p. 130).

Duranti (1994) appealed to Jenkinson's precepts and Roman law in her argument that appraisal defined as attribution of

value is inconsistent with archival theory and the nature of archival materials. For her definition of archival duty Duranti turned to the ancient Romans, whose principles of perpetual memory and public faith charged archivists to preserve continuing, uninterrupted memory of actions attested to by documents. As representations of their creators' administrative transactions, archival documents share the characteristics of impartiality, authenticity, naturalness, interrelatedness, and uniqueness. For Duranti impartiality and authenticity imbue each document with primacy for conveyance of truth; naturalness and interrelatedness mean all documents contribute equally to the whole and are therefore equally important; and uniqueness makes each document necessary to the meaning of the archives of which it is a part. Because attribution of value seeks to exclude documents or records groups from the archives, appraisal compromises the integrity and meaning of the entire archives.

The non-appraising, keeper rationale fails because it imposes imperatives for practice derived from inductive inferences. Jenkinson arrived at his conclusions about archival nature not through testing but from observation of conditions in the United Kingdom in the 1920s. Duranti reaffirmed Jenkinson's conclusions not through testing but by observing conditions in

ancient Rome, correlating Jenkinson's conclusions to them, and declaring them essential theory.

She took specific observations of organizational records & archives from Rome and the United Kingdom and inferred a rule of practice to be applied to all records from any origin in any culture.

While the research of appraisal practitioners might not meet all the standards of experimental research, it seeks to derive practice from operationalized definitions of mission, archives, and records which form a construct against which appraisal can be applied, reviewed, and adjusted. It infers from observation of actions that are testable and measurable; it is deductive and iterative.

In its own way documentation strategy, as articulated by Marshall (1998), follows the hypothetico-deductive model. The process defines the scope of documentation (the research problem); identifies documentary needs and sources (hypothesis & operationalization); implements the strategy (experimentation); documents the results (observation); and refines the strategy as changing circumstances dictate (iterative). Similarly the National Archives of Canada's macro-appraisal approach draws deductive inferences. The premises of functional analysis represent a hypothesis (Cook, 2001); and micro-appraisal

measurably tests the validity of those hypotheses. Functional analysis assumptions proven wrong are corrected, implemented, and tested again.

Other appraisal approaches also operationalize definitions, measure results, and adjust to the deductive conclusions. Operational definitions indicate the precise concrete steps taken in order to identify a variable. Collecting policies and appraisal criteria are operational definitions. Eastwood's (1993) definition of archival documents as evidence is operationalized in a way that can be measured. Boles and Marks Young's Black Box model (Hunter, 2003) operationalizes the considerations that form the construct of appraisal. Bearman's (1995) recommendations included the need for methods to assess how well archives achieve their goals: how well records serve as evidence, precedent, or historical understanding. Australian archivists operating in the records continuum establish integrated recordkeeping and archival regimes and monitor and audit those regimes. Reappraisal following the Black Box model provided the New York Public Library a measurable test of its principles (Sink, 1990). Documentation of processes lends to replicability and further tests to strengthen theory and practice.

Conclusion

Records arrive in archival custody not because providence directed them, but because they were fortunate enough to survive long enough to reach an archivist. Good fortune does not equate to worthiness for enduring preservation. Archival limitations belie the legitimacy of passive receipt and preservation. Greene (2009) said "We select because we affirm the necessity of such appraisal and our professional ability to do it thoughtfully and defensibly" (p. 27) and "We must also accept that selection is fundamental to who we are and why we are here" (p. 29).

Boles (2005) concluded that an archivist's purpose should be dictated by society's wishes and the institution's mission rather than universal principle. Mission must answer the questions "why do archives exist?" and "what purpose(s) does that archives serve?" Similarly the practices by which archivists fulfill their missions must be based on deduction rather than the received knowledge of universal principle that cannot be justified.

As the profession designated by society to fill a collective need, ultimately, the responsibility for the quality of the documentary record lies with archivists. To delegate, without supervision, participation, or a scientific rationale, the role of controlling which records are retained, abdicates

the fundamental duty upon which the justification for archival work is based.

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