

Theoretical Dialectics: A Commentary on Sampling Methodology and its Application

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Résumé

Ce commentaire soutient que la méthodologie utilisée dans les deux cas d'es-
pèce par Ellen Scheinberg et Evelyn Kolish démontre qu'un consensus
théorique sur l'évaluation a été atteint et que celui-ci est fondé sur les deux
principes fondamentaux de l'évaluation à savoir: l'impartialité et la provenance.
L'une des principales raisons qui explique cette prise de conscience de
l'intérêt de la théorie vient du fait que l'étude des dossiers électroniques a
forcé les archivistes à réorienter leur pensée de l'étude des dossiers particuliers
sur un support précis à une étude d'activités pour lesquels notre société
requiert de l'information.

Abstract

The commentary argues that the methodological practice used in the two case
studies (by Ellen Scheinberg and Evelyn Kolish) demonstrates that a theoretical
consensus regarding appraisal has been reached, and is derived from the
two central principles of appraisal: impartiality and provenance. A major factor
that has contributed to the new awareness of the value of theory comes
from the fact that the study of electronic records has forced us to refocus our
thinking from the study of particular records in a particular form, to a study of
activities from which our society requires documentation.

For the last ten years or so, archival appraisal has come under increasingly intense
scrutiny. This scrutiny has resulted in a disquieting realization, for a growing number,
that our modernist understanding of appraisal, or lack of understanding, was
based on a paradigm of anxiety that was developed, not on theory, but on a taxonomy
of value. During this time, we, as North Americans, existed in a theoretical
vacuum in which our practical care of records was often disconnected, if not

severed, from the international conventional wisdom of our predecessors, however bifurcated that wisdom might have been. The anxiety was expressed most eloquently in 1980 by Felix Hull:

You and I by our involvement [in appraisal] are either destroying or agreeing to the destruction of that very evidence which, in an almost Hippocratic oath sense, we are professionally bound to defend and preserve. That, without any question, is our first pitfall—a schizophrenic dilemma which we feel would not face us in an ideal world.¹

The language of the 1993 Association of Canadian Archivists conference theme still reflects our acceptance of the parameters of the old paradigm, with its images of contradiction: we are caught “between a rock and a hard place,” we are confronted by the “tension between theory and practice,” and we wonder aloud, “Does theory work in practice?”

In spite of the language, the papers presented by Ellen Scheinberg and Evelyn Kolish confirm that the old paradigm is fading. The long, arduous appraisal voyage from Banff to St John’s has changed us. We have thought/fought our way through anxiety to increasing coherence. While there are still important skirmishes around the edges that reflect our continuing two solitudes, the essential aspects of the tough debate are essentially over. The alarming intrusion of electronic records into our comfortable world of paper transactions has forced our best minds to think their way out of our modernist confusion back to a refurbished version of the coherence of the Jenkinsonian era.

The central focus of both papers demonstrates a theoretical consensus regarding appraisal that has repercussions in methodological practice. The theory itself is most clearly articulated in the Quebec model, but not well-developed in either one. Because of the important role of theory in helping us adapt to the complexities of our modern world, let me attempt to identify the theory from which the two methodologies are derived.

The major factors that have contributed to the new vitality that has entered the debate, the new awareness of the value of theory, and the new consensus that theory applies to the dramatically different world of record-keeping in which we live, come from the fact that the study of electronic records has forced us to refocus our thinking by broadening our view from the study of particular records in a particular form, usually paper, to the study of documented activity—activity about which our society requires documentation.

The comfortable paper pew we have been in for so long has allowed us to drift into complacency. It is no wonder, then, that we have been so unnerved by our sudden awareness that we are unprepared to deal with the shift our society has surreptitiously undergone from simple paper systems to invasive electronic information systems. After the fact, we have become aware that the shift is cataclysmic.

In the midst of the electronic revolution in which we live, jurisdictions alter, hierarchies shift, and functions are reshaped with confusing speed—like Star Trek’s uncontrollable and irascible “Q.”² In the midst of our disorientation, however, one thing remains the same: activities continue, as does the legal, moral, and cultural necessity to prove that the activities occurred. This is precisely our area of

expertise: the study of the phenomenon of records created in the process of a practical activity that of necessity, requires reliable documentation of transactions for continued existence. Such first-hand evidence tells an authentic and credible story of the activities of the creator of the records. This concept is the Jenkinsonian notion of the impartiality of the record from which is derived the newly-affirmed theoretical coherence. This coherence is exemplified in the two central principles of appraisal: the principle of impartiality and the principle of provenance.

The principle of impartiality recognizes that the authentic, credible, and impartial nature of archives, which is derived from the process of their creation and natural accumulation, must be preserved. The future usefulness of records as evidence, whether administrative or historical, which is essential to all users, is directly dependent on the preservation of the impartiality of records. This is accomplished through the application of the principle of *respect des fonds*, which respects and preserves the contextual integrity of each fonds, whether it be physical for paper records, or contextual for electronic records. If archivists fail to perform this fundamental task, the records will be rendered valueless as evidence and will, instead, be reduced to discrete historical artifacts.

The centrality of these principles is clearly articulated by both Scheinberg and Kolish, and demonstrates the primary role of theory in appraisal: the logically developed explanation of the phenomenon guides, and therefore limits, the particular action chosen. Evelyn Kolish applies the logical extension of general appraisal theory to the special case of sampling. The principle of impartiality guides the discussion and the appraisal in several ways. The statistical sample is valuable because it is representative of the original population of files. This is accomplished by using a precise statistical methodology to select a random sample from a series in which consecutive case file numbers have been assigned chronologically. Such a sample retains the overall pattern of the original series, and therefore limits the distortion of future understanding.

Kolish is guided by the theoretical explanation of an Interministerial Committee on Court Records that future research is best served by preserving a faithful documentary record of the activity of the entire system of the records creator. She shares the practical difficulties she encounters in the application of the theory to the case files. The theoretical framework of her analysis does not constitute a difficulty—rather, it is the starting point from which the validity of all action is judged. The manner in which she attempts to overcome or ease the difficulty can provide assistance to all of us when we meet similar problems.

Scheinberg is guided by the goal of the National Archives policy, as developed by Terry Cook, to preserve the clearest image possible of the records creators and, by extension, of contemporary society.³ Both speakers articulate, and are guided by, essentially the same principle, although Cook rightly qualifies the concept of retaining a faithful documentary record by limiting the goal of sampling to selecting the clearest image possible, thereby reflecting our modern acceptance of the notion of relativity. As an adjunct to the weary debate of user-driven value, both recognize that the theoretical approach best serves the needs of researchers by preserving the evidentiary nature of the records.

The principle of provenance provides an objective framework for structural analysis, the purpose of which is to identify and preserve the records series that most clearly document the primary functions and activities of the records-creator. Structural analysis provides a comprehensive analysis of the contextual relationships that exist between a records-creator and its records. The analysis seeks to identify and understand the functions, procedures, and activities of the records-creator, as reflected in its administrative organization and in the documentary forms of its records series. The administrative analysis is assisted by diplomatic analysis in order to relate the functions and actions of the creator to the functions and role of the records series.

Scheinberg offers us a case study of the macro-appraisal method, now the approved method at the National Archives of Canada, which, she argues, exemplifies theory in conjunction with research. She demonstrates the process of analysis by which she chooses the best selection method—in this case not sampling, but selection—and clearly follows the tried and true adage, “let the records tell their story.” Again, the clearly-defined methodology will be of great usefulness to all of us as we attempt to make a dent in each of our massive/microscopic piles of paper and electronic records that await appraisal.

We have heard several cautionary comments about macro-appraisal that we must keep in mind. Heather MacNeil has cautioned us to remember that we analyze activities in order to appraise records; diplomatic analysis, however, reminds us that one is embedded in the other. Richard Brown has reminded us that the self-conscious descriptions that records-creators produce about their activities must be analyzed in light of the impartial record of the activity.⁴ I do not think the macro-appraisal methodology denies either point. However, let us remember in our application to be sensitive to their important concerns.

Both Kolish and Scheinberg talk of practical tensions of working in the context of unruly record-keeping systems and limited resources. Our response to such tensions is exacerbated by the fact that many of us have a stubborn predilection towards coherence and linear thought in spite of these concepts being intellectually unfashionable. It is not surprising, however, that record-keeping reflects in content and form the disorderly world of human activity. Archival theory must be flexible enough to respond to this reality by precisely identifying the essence of documented activity in order that the theory may be broadly applied to the messy real world of records.

The archival profession has made great strides in the last two years. An essential part of a new theoretical coherence has been established. However, those of us convinced of the role of theory, and pleased with the emerging consensus that seeks to preserve the evidentiary nature of archives, must consider respectfully the thoughtful concerns of those amongst us who will not allow closure of the discussion. We as a profession will benefit from continuing to struggle to overcome the two solitudes in which we exist. If we learn how to defeat our own seemingly incommensurable impasse in the midst of society’s shifting paradigm, we will be able to share our insights with our constitutionally-fractured country, to the benefit of us all.⁵

It is surprising to many that archival theory, developed in a paper world, appears to be logically valid in the electronic age. While the form of documentation has changed dramatically and exponentially, the need for documentation of activity remains a central feature of our society. The electronic age is drowning in information, but is bereft of all but the most current and cursory evidence of the activities of our contemporary records-creators. Our knowledge of contextual relationships and our understanding of the value of historical perspectives are urgently needed by records-creators and computer specialists in order to begin to establish electronic procedures of accountability. Our challenge is to engage in the ongoing theoretical dialectic of the information revolution in which we live so that we may ensure the preservation of the documentary heritage of our society, whatever its method of production.

Notes

- * Commentary on Evelyn Kolish, "Sampling Methodology and its Application: an Illustration of the Tension Between Theory and Practice," and Ellen Scheinberg, "Case File Theory: Does it Work in Practice?" delivered at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, St. John's, Newfoundland, 23 July 1993.
- 1 Felix Hull, "The Appraisal of Documents—Problems and Pitfalls," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 5 (April 1980), p. 287.
- 2 Q is an omnipotent god-like being who changes form at will, either capriciously or planned, for good intent or ill, depending on his whim. He appears occasionally on the television show, "Star Trek: The Next Generation."
- 3 Terry Cook, "Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal," in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 49-50.
- 4 Heather MacNeil, "Archival Theory and Practice: Between Two Paradigms," *Archivaria* 37 (Spring 1994), pp. 6-20; Richard Brown, paper presented at session, "Applying Theory and Professional Methodologies to Institutional Practice," at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, St. John's, Newfoundland, 22 July 1993.
- 5 Brien Brothman "Terminal Culture: When Archival Theory Meets New Technology," paper presented at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, St. John's, Newfoundland, 23 July 1993. Brothman presented Thomas Kuhn's notion of incommensurability, which argues that emerging paradigms of scientific thought often are not only incompatible, but actually incommensurable with that which has gone before. Taken from Thomas Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962), p. 102.