Archival Description and Records from Historically Marginalized Cultures: A View from a Postmodern Window*

Donghee Sinn**

Contents

ABSTRACT

In the archival field, the last decade has witnessed much discussion on archives' broad responsibilities for social memory. Considering that the social role of archives has stemmed from postmodern thinking suggests a paradigm shift from viewing archives as static recorded objects to viewing them as dynamic evidence of human memory. The modern archives and archivists are products of nineteenth-century positivism, limiting their function to archiving written documents within stable organizations. The new thoughts on the social role of archives provide a chance to realize that traditional archival practices have preserved only a sliver of organizational memory, thus ignoring fluid records of human activities and memory.

Archival description is the primary method for users to access materials in archives. Thus, it can determine how archival materials will be used (or not used). The traditional archival description works as the representation of archival materials and is directly projected from the hierarchy of organizational documents. This paper argues that archivists will need to redefine archival description to be more sensitive to atypical types of archival materials from various cultural contexts. This paper surveys the postmodern approaches to archival concepts in relation to descriptive practices. It also examines some issues related to representing historically marginalized groups in archival description who were previously neglected in traditional archival practices.

Keywords: Archives, Social Memory, Postmodern Approach

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** Assistant Professor, Department of Information Studies College of Computing and Information State University of New York, NY USA(dsinn@uamail.albany.edu)

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1. Introduction

Archival description, in the traditional sense, has focused on typecast information about the creator and the collection it describes. It concerns the representation of archival materials directly projected from the hierarchy of organizational documents. Traditional archival principles have been established primarily for records from bureaucratic administrative systems. However, in the past two decades, a new light of postmodernism thought has introduced broader and more active roles for archives and archival description. Postmodernism distrusts modernism where universal truths and objective knowledge from scientific rationalism are highly valued. Postmodern perspectives support the changing contexts of records within diverse cultural interpretations. When one considers fluid and organic interpretations of records in different contexts, the traditional archival knowledge and principles cannot fully embrace this broad notion of records in practices. This concept is seen in the new thoughts and interest in records of socially under-represented groups who have been ignored or neglected in traditional archival systems. Archival scholars and postmodern philosophers argue that archives are the product of social memory and portray the power relationships of society over its history and memory. This paper reviews a body of publications on archival description through the lens of postmodern thought. It examines the basic concepts in archival description from this perspective and how archival concepts should be redefined for cultural records beyond organizational records, especially for records of socially and historically marginalized groups.

2. Archives for evidence

The traditional sense of archives focuses mainly on preserving documents to provide evidence of related activities of the creators. The core function of archives has been established in a way to ensure the long-term preservation of documentary evidence and to reflect the original usage in organizations. The archival profession and theoretical backgrounds of archival knowledge stem from the nineteenth century positivism and the bureaucratic structure of modern society (Cook, 2000). The principles in archival arrangement and description, such as respect de fonds, provenance and original order, have therefore served for organizational documents and were created for administrative purposes. The principles emphasize the "importance of the creator's mandate and functions, and fosters the use of a hierarchical method, a 'top-down' approach"

(Duranti, 1998, p.177). Thus, archivists rely largely on preexisting systems and structures in records that creators have maintained. The description of records thus stresses such information as organizational contexts and the functions and activities of creators. Archival practices have been developed to protect reliable evidence of transactions through accountable record keeping of authentic documents (Duranti, 1994; Cox, 1994).

The notion of records for evidence advocates that records are kept for purposes of administration and accountability. A record is a by-product of organizational activities and will reside in a certain structure of a record system. Because records serve as evidence, they imply truthfulness in their contents as accountability and authenticity are the most critical criteria for sound recordkeeping. This traditional understanding of a record does not widely accept other potential usages and interpretation of records. The characteristics of a record are limited to "truthfulness and objectivity," thus excluding other qualities of a record. In this sense, archival functions center on authentic records through unbroken custody. Archivists are seen as impartial and objective mediators between creators and users. Archivists trust in and reflect creators' decisions on organizing and describing for overall archival value. Thus, the traditional practice of archiving results in passive roles for archivists who serve as guardians of written legacies.

Postmodern ideas have challenged the narrow concept of a record as evidence and the passive role of the archivist. Postmodern researchers view a record within broader contexts and pluralizing dimensions. The concept of a record in the archival community has been largely assumed as being only one concept with a single cluster of properties (Brothman, 2002). However, in the general practices of archivists, the term "record" is accepted with various definitions and used with different interpretations. Brothman asserts that the concept of a record varies and that the definitions can be placed in a range between a strong sense and a weak sense. The concepts near the weak end allow flexibility in meaning and imply multiple notions of the term whereas strong sense definitions lean toward a positivism idea and that a record should be truthful and objective to actually be a record (Brothman, 2002). A weak sense in the definition of record reflects the new understanding on archives and records in that social events and phenomena offer new meanings to records and, in turn, records collectively present how a society preserves its history, as Jacque LeGoff states: "the document is what remains" (1992, p.xvii). With this view, archival practice is, in fact, affected by historically contingent conditions: it is seldom possible or meaningful to achieve objectivity and truthfulness in records.

3. Archives for memory

When seeing archives in the broader context of a social framework beyond the rigid evidential function, one can understand how archives shape social memory and history. An archives is an institution to which a society delegates the responsibility of remembering (Nora, 1989) and documenting evidence (in a broader sense) of the society. The efforts to connect archives and public memory usually begin with an emphasis on the cultural function of archives in institutionalizing information to establish public memory. History and social memory of the past are written and woven in a way of addressing the present within the context of a social framework. Kenneth Foote (1990) connects archives and memory within a broadened view of communication and culture. He observes archives as places that can be valuable means for "extending the temporal and spatial range of human communication" (p.379). He explains that social pressure on a historical event can influence and shape archival records and tries to persuade readers of the cultural role of archives in a society. The modern society of today cannot be understood without written records. Pierre Nora (1989) articulates that "Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image" (p.13). In other words, archives as memory institutions play a crucial role in determining what may comprise the historical records of a people and their culture. If archives preserve only official administrative documents, those records are the ones that will remain into the future and thus future researchers will understand the contemporary society through those official documents that remain.

Memory is constructed through sharing and interacting with different perspectives among the people of a group. People construct memories within the social dimensions: social groups determine what public events will be memorable and how they will be memorialized. Memory, thus, is not made in isolation, but in correlation within the context of the group. An individual's memory is shaped by how a society remembers and what the society retains for history. As a delegate of societal memory, archives assume responsibility to collectively shape social memory based on archival holdings. In this sense, archives connect the past and the present. The past is a social construction reshaped and reorganized by the concerns of the present. Problems and issues in the present are the starting points to address discussions regarding the past. In other words, the past can be interpreted differently by present events. In a similar token, records and the contexts of records about the past can be viewed differently in different times according to what concerns the present. Intellectual, social, and political traditions and

conditions of the present affect the standpoint to look at records and, therefore, the past.

The value of records can be further expanded to include irreplaceable documentary heritage of a society from this perspective of memory. Brien Brothman (2001) proposes the concept of records as cognitive memory artifacts rather than mere legal and evidence-bearing artifacts. He asserts that when archives serve as memory - rather than for historical narratives or evidential purposes, they will have broader responsibilities in a social context. He states that "Memory's archivist is interested in the past's residue as material for promoting integrated knowledge, social identity, and the formation of group consciousness; history's archivist is interested in finding records and, in them, uncovering evidence to develop a linear narrative about a past that is ours, yet different from us" (p.62).

When archives concentrate on evidence, the record system and archival procedures often exclude the 'powerless transactions' (Duranti, 1998, p.177) or other events that are not documented in official records. A South African archivist, Verne Harris (2002), challenges a common notion that archives reflects reality and provides an image of an event or an action. He argues that documentary records provide only a sliver of a window into the event. Archives, through written records from official transactions, document only a small portion of records about what is happening in a society. Harris (2002) views archivists as active documenters of society and shapers of social memory and records as a carrier of memory. An archivist in postmodern thought is an active agent with power over the decisions on what will remain and what will not. More specifically, archivists exercise the power to create and omit the contextual meaning inherent in records in archival descriptions. Thus, archives are an expression and instrument of prevailing relations of power through the documentation process. Recognizing archival power, the postmodern scholars view archivists as "performers in the drama of memory-making" and that "memory is not something found or collected in archives, but something that is made, and continually re-made" (Cook and Schwartz, 2002, p.172).

4. New Emphasis on Powerless Transactions

Since traditional archives focus on the static structures for recordkeeping and official documentation, archives give greater voice to dominating members of a society than to groups who may have been historically marginalized. Archives were traditionally established by the state to serve the state (Cook, 2000). Their collections, thus, consist of administrative documents from

bureaucratic systems. However, literacy or writing/printing is not a prerequisite condition for social memory. Non-recorded methods and other types of transmissions in traditions, images and recollected knowledge of the past are still conveyed and sustained by various commemorating activities, such as ritual performances. Connerton (1989) points out, "one of the limitations of documentary evidence is that few people bother to write down what they take for granted" (p.18). If archives preserve only the mainstream narratives of history, they are preserving only the tip of the iceberg and overlooking the majority of the historical reserves. An extreme example can be colonization and its posterity's records. Colonization alters the indigenous knowledge of a land and its people. The colonizing country destroys the civilization and history of the indigenous people in an effort to establish authority and control. If an archives of the posterity of the colonized country preserves only for official documents, they might not find any memory of the indigenous people during the colonial period in their holdings. In fact, what they preserve is the memory of the country which destroyed the cultural heritage of the indigenous people.

The Canadian "total archives" model, developed in the late 1970s, emphasizes archives as a diversified and contemporary documentary base for future historians and is garnered with a global vision of the society and its component parts (Wallot, 1991). In the total archives model not only is the voice of the rich, powerful and famous recorded but also that of the meager and menial (Cook, 1979). The total archives centers on a diversified documentary base for future historians and articulates a strategy to document all aspects of historical development and all segments of a community by acquiring not only official administrative records but also related personal papers and corporate records as well as other records in various formats (Smith, 1972; Cook, 1979/1980).

5. Archives and Historically Marginalized Cultures

McKemmish, Gilliland-Swetland, and Ketelaar (2005) argue that major research and development in archival knowledge and skill base are largely affected by globalism. The global framework for managing archives has established archival laws, professional standards, and archival information systems for current recordkeeping. The initiatives of globalism have drawn exclusively on frameworks that have evolved in mainstream archival programs, including both government and private sector, in western archival science to seek commonalities in problems and solutions for archival functions. Communities outside the mainstream have been paid little

attention in these developments, which in turn indicates the differential power relationships at play. Further, archival description and descriptive standards have been mechanisms to reinforce mainstream values and marginalize weaker voices in records and recordkeeping contexts.

As pointed out in recent archival literature from postmodern viewpoints, there is a need to redefine the archival landscape that has excluded oral records, literature, songs and dances, ritual, arts, artifacts, and other commemorative activities (Schwartz and Cook, 2002; Hamilton et al., 2002). The establishment of collective memories and identities of communities are mediated by cultural tools of texts, oral or written, as well as other phenomena, objects, and activities that the members of a community participate in and create. The current archival knowledge and practices reflect the mainstream archival performances (white, European-North American, logocentric, text-based) and do not always provide the best service for unconventional archival bodies (Schwartz and Cook, 2002). Thus, historically marginalized groups in a society have not been actively documented for their memory and history in the current archival practices and social structures of recordkeeping.

Often, there is a need to develop different criteria for evaluation of archival performances and different infrastructure for legislative mandates and archival systems for community archives. Community archives and ethnic archives may have different cultures for remembering and documenting history, as we have seen from an instance of predominating oral cultures in the Pacific Islands (Wareham, 2002). Even among written records, languages could present a significant problem in archival systems. Languages of minority groups that are different from the mainstream heritage can hinder users from retrieving and accessing records in those languages, even in fortunate cases that such records were preserved in a mainstream archives. Archivists' lack of knowledge of those languages often results in illogical arrangement and ineffective description, if not total omission (Maliniemi, 2009). In general, socially marginalized groups are not well described in standardized access systems. Provenance may not be an effective method to search and find information about under voiced groups such as blacks, women, or ethnic and cultural minorities. For records of these groups, subject access works better than provenance or fonds access when subject terms include terminology in functions, occupations, and types of materials beyond topics and names (Beattie, 1997). Further, when cultural objects that are not associated with text are described by text-centric descriptive standards, many of the facets that make the objects a unique and powerful medium of expression often cannot be adequately represented (Schwartz, 2002).

When conventional archives are equipped with standards and systems for mainstream heritage records and are not suitable for unconventional records, grass-root approaches to records have been proposed instead. The internet has made description and archiving easier for individuals with unconventional records. For records about eccentric cultural objects, such as tattoos, the inclusive archives of the internet using folksonomy can be utilized for discovery and access by users (Wright, 2009). Also, Shilton and Srinivasan (2007) argue that the traditional practices of appraisal, arrangement, and description need to be rearticulated as participatory, community-oriented processes, to meaningfully represent traditionally marginalized communities. They propose a participatory archiving model that supports community involvement during the appraisal, arrangement, and description phases of creating an archival record before records are deposited in archives. Their understanding is that record creators have always been involved in the choices to represent themselves about what is saved and deleted through resulting organization by habits, practices, and preferences to represent themselves.

6. New Views to Archival Description

By and large, postmodern thoughts have influenced overall understanding of archival science and practices. Cook (2000) sees that postmodern philosophy has brought a paradigm shift in archival science. Records are understood as dynamic virtual concepts and serve as active and evolving agents in the formation of human and organizational memory. The contexts surrounding records are organic and fluid networks of organizational workflow or personal functionality. Archivists assume their roles in shaping social memory and not in passively safeguarding a static legacy. The context behind records, the power relationships shaping the documentary heritage, and narratives about records in archival practices have become more important than the record itself or its content. The power relationships and interactions with records in different situations will continuously change the meanings of records. Once admitting the ever-changing nature in the meaning of records, the process of describing records and description narratives of records is now deemed with a new value.

As the understanding of the context of records is contingent socially and historically, the activities that archivists perform for describing records are also socially constructed. New insights from social events and historical interpretation always provide new meanings to records, and thus the representation of such records needs to reflect new meanings and have a new

interpretation. Thus, archival description itself is a fluid process to reveal ever-evolving meanings (Yakel, 2004). Yakel uses the term "archival representation" instead of "archival arrangement and description" to embrace the holistic process of archival tasks, including (re)ordering, interpreting, creating surrogates, and designing architectures for representational systems for archival materials.

Cook (2000) formulates archival arrangement and description from postmodern insights to concentrate on "enriched contextual understandings of the multiple interrelationships and uses of the records creation milieu, as well as incorporating related system documentation and functional metadata from the records' creator into archival descriptive tools" (p.22-23). In this sense, Cook (2001) maintains that archivists would need to carefully ask "what is presented in finding aids as a monolith and what is suppressed, and why?" Archivists need to engage openly with their clients and their needs, and archival descriptive narratives need to reflect "much richer, multi-relational, many-to-many contextual linkages" in archival collections. Cook continues to say that "As archivists understand better the complex arrangements of modern records and the organizational (and personal) cultures that produce them, postmodern descriptive systems would move away from the monolithic legacy of past archival theory, from the old fashioned one-thing-one-entry approach if they are intent on satisfying researchers' needs to understand the historical context of records, the activities that generated them, and the information they contain" (Cook, 2001, p.32).

Since archival description is the access point from the users' side, it holds hegemony over how archival holdings would be used (or not used). Archival choices on how to describe records reinforce certain values in archival systems, implicitly and explicitly. Archivists' understanding and interpretation about the enduring value of records also play a part in descriptions. Archivists' knowledge and languages in descriptions are the vehicles to transport users to those records. Thus, archivists impose a filter that affects the way users use records and, therefore, the way users understand the past through records. Through the filtering system, archives selectively preserve and describe records that might reinforce and legitimize the existing power structure (Cook and Schwartz, 2002; Hedstrom, 2002; Harris, 2002).

As archival description is a product of inferential groundwork (Meehan, 2009), archivists' own values influence the narratives in descriptions. Users see what archivists intended users to read from descriptions. Thus, archivists exercise power over archival collections because users will read the description of a collection before they actually review the collection, thus forming initial knowledge about the collection. Nesmith (2002) views archivists as key mediators or constructors

of the knowledge available in archives and archives as a product of mediations of communication which will ultimately determine the intellectual understanding of a society. Users may use archives differently depending on how archives describe their holdings, as noted by Nesmith and his use of the Gettysburg Address as an example. If this historical event were named differently, such as the Gettysburg Talk or the Gettysburg Sermon, he asserts that it might not have gone through the meaning changes as it had by different people (Nesmith, 2002).

7. Transparency in Archival Description

By refusing the traditional view of archives as a neutral institution, Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook (2002) consider archives as "one foundation of historic understanding" and a place to "validate our experience, our perceptions, our narratives, our stories" for our memory. They view records as political, and the context and information of records in archives imply "power" over collective memory and national identity. They argue that the "power" is naturally generated in the relationship between archives and the societies that create and use them. Thus, they assert that archivists themselves should maintain transparency in their archival work and be accountable since political power is involved and the subjective inferential process is comprised in their work. Duff and Harris (2002) argue that this power should be shared so that archives users participate in this power yield process to control and check archivists' exercise of the power and to shape society's memory and knowledge together.

The inferential process is the main task that archivists perform while researching and interpreting records and creating a description. Their research involves understanding the creator and the context of records being created and interpreting the relationship between records and event that the records document. This whole process can only happen when archivists intellectually understand and evaluate the records and create their own judgment about records based on their professional knowledge. Meehan (2006) called this process the "inferential groundwork." She sees inferential groundwork as a guiding force behind much of the decision making process. The inferential process enables archivists to determine their viewpoints, terminology, and understanding of records in representing records. Only through this process can archivists play a role as "performers in the drama of memory-making"; in fact, the memories that archivists represent from records is "not something found or collected in archives, but something that is made, and continually re-made" (Cook and Schwartz, 2002).

8. Storytelling of Archivists

As addressed above, archivists create descriptive narratives based on their inferential groundwork. As a result, a finding aid, or any descriptive narrative of an archival collection, presents a singular view from an archivist. This singular view may reflect the limited knowledge, experience, bias, and other personal values of the archivist. The quality and content of a finding aid will vary depending on who created the description and what the professional and personal background is of the archivist. Thus, archival description is the process of making a value-driven selection of facts that will construct memory and historical narratives (Duff and Harris, 2002). The archivist's values, selecting decisions, and the reason behind them can present his/her own stories about the records. Each story an archivist tells about records changes the meaning of the records and re-creates them. The stories about records are created not only by archivists, for all other stakeholders of the records have their own positions to create their stories. Duff and Harris (2002) maintain that "records are always in the process of being made, that 'their' stories are never ending, and that the stories of those who are conventionally called records creators, records managers, archivists, users and so on are (shifting, intermingling) parts of bigger stories understandable only in the ever-changing broader contexts of society" (p.265).

Typical archival descriptions offer only a singular perspective of an archivist on a collection, yet they fail to document the archivist's intervention and his/her own decisions based on background, expertise, opinion, and knowledge. Many postmodern thinkers suggest that one of the ways to avoid compelling pre-established understanding that archivists may have posed in archival descriptions is to inform users how archival decisions were made, what value they saw from records, what sources they referenced for creating a description, and even who the archivist is. This approach acknowledges that archivists' decisions can be incomplete and biased and that through this mechanism, archivists can be more transparent about their professional decisions. In doing so, users are better informed about other possible interpretations of the records. Cook and Schwartz (2002) argue that there is no "one" right way to describe a record when deconstructing "the context" of description. Notifying users why records are retained and displayed and the relationship of records in the larger documentary universe will provide users with information about archivists' own value in relation to the records.

Another way to inform users of a singular perspective concerning a collection and the subjective and mediating role of an archivist in archival description is a finding aid colophon,

proposed by Light and Hyry (2002). A finding aid colophon is a statement from the creator of the finding aid that details the processing of the collection and is attached separately to the finding aid. Archivists could use a colophon to document "what they know about the history and provenance of a collection and to reveal appraisal, arrangement, description, preservation, and other decisions they made while working on a collection" (p.224). Additionally, a colophon can include information about the processors of the collection and authors of the finding aid. Such information alerts users about the influence of archivists, including possible bias and subjectivity, on the collection and its description.

In the tone of languages and styles in writing of archival description, archivists can reveal to some extent that their research and interpretation of a collection are not universal or absolute. MacNeil (2005) suggested using conditional phrases in archival descriptions. Archivists often describe records based on incomplete fragments of evidence and piece together those fragments to create a cohesive narrative. Using conclusive languages in description, then, may be creating a misleading impression of completeness. Thus, she adopts an approach from the historical writing of Carlo Ginzburg using conditional phrases such as "perhaps" or "may have been" in archival description. In this way, archivists can leave room for other possibilities of interpretations and can inform users what the archivist does and does not know. Using citations and footnotes in finding aids (Meehan, 2009, pp.88-89) can be another way to address concerns about the incompleteness of available sources and inconclusiveness of the archivist's own process as well as a way to explain the reasoning behind a particular arrangement or description decisions. Providing sources and reference information used by archivists will achieve greater accountability in archival practices as well.

9. Including Multiple Voices in Description

In order to overcome the limits and risks from a singular understanding of a collection, some researchers suggest including different views and voices into an archival description. Light and Hyry (2002) propose the use of annotations in finding aids. As archivists and users repeat the process of discovery, interpretation, and explanation for a collection over time, they gain more knowledge about the collection, new insights into the context and content of the collection, and the significance of certain records. Expert users in different subject fields may have different perspectives on the value and understanding of the collection and could have updated

information about certain facts in records. As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (1998), annotation is "a note added to anything written." Annotation allows people other than original content authors to add descriptions. The diverse comprehension of a collection from people with various backgrounds can be documented in annotations of a finding aid. In this way, finding aids would become the center for the accumulation of knowledge on a collection instead of remaining the product of an archivist's expertise. As seen from some e-commerce companies, such as Amazon.com's product reviews or comments by customers, annotations to the original record of a product could shed light on hidden aspects of the product. The Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections (http://polarbears.si.umich.edu/) at the University of Michigan create a collaborative system that allows users to participate in contributing to the knowledge building of the collection. This digital collection employs commenting and recommender systems and allows new methods of interaction with primary sources (Yakel, Shaw, & Reynolds, 2007).

Finding aids are one of the most common and often the only access points to records in archives. The above examples raise possible ways to provide multiple access points at various levels. Multiple channels to records would make archival description and archival systems more democratic and effective. The web space and web 2.0 technologies offer a great opportunity to implement multi-dimensional (facets) access points easily and effectively. Archival descriptions using new tools could present not only the contents and contexts of records but also other paths to related information and the relationships and interactions among records, readers, creators, and describers as well as other groups outside of archives. The web is an undifferentiating space as it does not discern those with or without power or the mainstream or marginalized members of a society. The web 2.0 culture of collaboration and participation blends information creators, deliverers, and users together in the process of information creation, distribution, and consumption. Thus, the web can be used to facilitate the process of annotating finding aids more democratically and to provide hidden facets or information from records that have been neglected from archival standards and practices. In the library world, much research is conducted to address the next generation of OPACs (Open Public Access Catalogs). The next generation OPACs concentrates on optimized browsing functionalities using faceted information organization. Archivists can think of a way to utilize the advances in technology in the library world to provide diverse methods to represent archival collections with diverse facets.

10. Conclusion

Archival description was established from modern administrative organizational structure; however, it has been revisited and redefined through postmodernism influence. The view that archives serve for memory and history, not merely for administrative evidence, has brought great changes in the notions of creating archival description and the ways to use and understand archival description by users. Traditional archival knowledge and skill base have been reinforcing the mainstream values of a society and marginalizing weaker voices as current archival systems are not sufficient to embrace atypical materials in archives and different cultures of remembering and documenting in minority groups. Archival researchers have proposed to include the voices of all stakeholders, such as archivists, record creators, record managers, users, etc., in archival description in a way to minimize the bias or limitations that archivists would pose to description and to accumulate a knowledge base of the collection with different interpretations. The web space and the web 2.0 technology offer a stage for these new activities where users can contribute and participate in distributing and consuming archival records.

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