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Qualitative psychology and the archive

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QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND THE ARCHIVE: INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL SECTION

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Abstract

This special section considers the relevance of a reflexive engagement with archives in psychology, and explores the value of archives as a resource for empirical inquiry and scholarship. The contributions offer reflective commentaries on the potential and limitations of working with (and within) archives. They also highlight the range of theoretical, methodological and practical issues that psychologists might want to take into account when engaging in this kind of inquiry, including the need to treat archives and archiving as set of societal practices through which the past is not only preserved, but also constructed, and constituted.

Keywords: archives, qualitative psychology, social justice, history of psychology, scholarly activism, troubled pasts

Since the 1990s, psychology has witnessed the ‘explosive institutionalization of qualitative methods,’ a development noted for its methodological creativity and diversity (Wertz, 2014, p.10). Within this expanding field of inquiry, research has predominantly relied on researcher-led approaches to data collection (most notably interviews), and has maintained focus on the human condition as observed or recorded in the present. Much less often researchers have delved into the past and applied the tools of their trade to institutionally-preserved records, namely archives.

This trend reflects a more longstanding ambivalence towards archives in psychology. On the one hand, there is a venerable tradition within the discipline of exploring documentary records to investigate individual and collective experience. Allport (1942, p.191) famously argued that the careful exploration of personal documents (letters, diaries, etc.) could ‘anchor a discipline in the bedrock of human experience’. Others, more interested in the nature of shared experience, have called for the study of collectively produced documents, texts, etc. as a way of exploring the social history of human practices and behaviors (Gergen, 1973). On the other hand, within psychology, the conventional approach to archives (and history more generally) has been to treat them as little more than a source of real-life examples that can be called upon to illustrate a particular psychological theory or corroborate findings obtained through other means. Rather than being an intrinsic part of psychological inquiry, engagement with archives (and other records of the past) tends to be treated as a precursor to some other, more concrete, more solid, and methodologically more rigorous (and present-centered) analytical strategy (see Byford & Tileagă, 2014; Tileagă & Byford, 2014).

One implication of this approach is that psychologists have seldom engaged with archives and archiving in their own right, and explored them, in a reflexive and critical way, as more than

a source of ‘data’; as a set of societal practices through which the past is not only preserved, but also constructed, and constituted.

This special section aims to foreground the relevance of this kind of reflexive engagement with archives for psychology. The contributions cover a range of different types of archives that psychologists encounter in their research, and illustrate how engagement with them can advance different areas of psychological inquiry: the promotion of social justice, reassessing the canon of social psychology, pursuing scholar-activism, or studying aspects of human experience which are both biographical and historical.

The first article in the Special Section, by Kimberly Belmonte and Susan Opotow, examine how archivists theorize what archives are, and how their own reflexive accounts can be used to widen the scope of social justice through more inclusive practices when it comes to acquiring archival material and making it publicly available. Belmonte and Opotow invite psychologists to join an interdisciplinary community of scholars and practitioners (including archivists) interested in the critical reconstruction of the past.

Next, using the example of Stanley Milgram’s archive at Yale, Stephen Gibson considers how a qualitative reexamination of the preserved audio recordings of obedience experiments can lead to a reassessment of this classic study and its assumptions. In doing so, Gibson reflects on how psychologists might engage with research archives, and demonstrates the role of this kind of engagement for shedding new light on the meaning of past, and present, research practices.

Unlike Belmonte and Opotow and Gibson, who engage critically with what might be called ‘traditional archives’, Rachel Liebert considers the benefits of psychologists creating their own digital archives. Liebert advocates the practice of ‘radical archiving’ as a way of ‘bearing witness’ and creating an alternative to conventional/institutional archives which often perpetuate

hegemonic or even oppressive discourses. She describes her own experience of scholarly activism informed by critical psychology, and explores how her involvement with the creation of new, digital archive of a controversial court case helped challenge a contentious societal, and in this specific case, police, practice.

Finally, the paper by Jovan Byford and Cristian Tileagă applies the critical lens of discursive psychology to two types of accounts of troubled pasts which straddle the biographical and the historical. First are Holocaust survivor testimonies, personal accounts of experience which are often systematically archived as part of large scale interview projects. The article shows that the broader debates about the historiographic and commemorative value of survivors' accounts, which made testimonies inherently collectable and archiveable in the first place, are played out in the testimonies themselves, as rhetorical concerns that survivors, and interviewers, attend to while reconstructing their troubled past. Second are confessions of collaborations with Romanian communist secret police, provoked by the opening of state archives in that country. In this case, individual remembering takes the form of a rhetorical self-examination, and is positioned as an alternative to, and argument against, institutional remembering contingent on official records.

The choice of contributions for this special section reflects the plurality of ways of engaging with archives. The articles offer reflective commentaries on the potential and limitations of working with (and within) archives, and flag the range of theoretical, methodological and practical issues that psychologists might want to take into account when entering, or producing, an archive. Therefore, as a whole, this special section demonstrates the value of archives as a resource for empirical inquiry and scholarship. It also highlights the fact that working with archives does not stop researchers drawing on specific research methods such

as discursive psychology, rhetorical analysis, ‘critical incident technique’, and others. Quite the contrary, engagement with archives is most fruitful when coupled with the application of a *critical* methodological approach which interrogates the practices through which archives are created.

There are three important, overarching points that run through this special section. The first point is that archives should be seen as public sites for creating psychologically relevant knowledge about human experience. Archives examined in the contributions might well differ in size and scope but they all tell stories of diverse interpretive communities: psychologists, archivists, the New York City police, the eastern European secret police, Holocaust survivors, etc. For that reason, working with archives (supported or not by other empirical methods) can reveal the specific conceptions and values shared by different people and institutions, at different times. This can play an important role in shifting or nuancing, existing psychological, historical and social scientific understanding of past and present mentalities and practices.

Second, archives are not just a source of data about the past or a methodological resource but also a *topic* in its own right. Archives, and the social practices that underpin them are ‘historical phenomena’ (Lynch, 1999, p. 83), cultural artefacts to be both constructed and deconstructed. They are nested at various levels of social organization – they range from family archives to those belonging to social and political institutions, from local, regional and national archives, to global ones, from private to public - yet all of them are a product of more or less formalized practices of collecting, coding, searching, indexing, writing, selecting, and deleting. The analysis of these practices needs to be incorporated into any exploration of archival material. As a consequence, the task of the psychologist venturing into an archive is not merely to interpret evidence or to look for something that is ‘hidden’ in the archive, but to entertain the

idea that what conventionally counts as ‘evidence’ or ‘data’ is itself a product of social, organizational and historical practices (cf. Lynch and Bogen, 1996).

Finally, this special issue considers archives as sites that provide material for writing various kinds of (qualitative) psychology, in a way that promotes interdisciplinary enquiries (Gergen, 2014). Whenever qualitative psychologists enter, discover, or create, archives, and work meticulously with them, they come closer to historians, anthropologists or ethnographers. They are not only engaged in psychological research, but historical and cultural analysis. Thus, engagement with archives, in their various forms, can help psychologists bring back into focus the importance of history, culture and context, and open up the potential for interdisciplinarity and pluralism. In doing so, archives offer psychologists a more solid platform for embracing more fully the ‘systematic study of social history’ (Gergen, 1973, p.319) and for constituting psychology as a genuine ‘anthropology of modern culture’ (Moscovici, 1987, p. 517).

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