SAGE Research Methods: Diversifying and Decolonizing Research

Working With Queer Archives Through Radical Empathy

Abstract

Research about queer archives has grown exponentially over recent decades. Projects have used archives as sources (Cifor, 2017; Halberstam, 2005), examined the formation and management of queer community-led archive organisations (Taves Sheffield, 2020), and queered archival processes (Lee, 2017). As the visibility of queer histories within research and heritage practice has increased, ethical tensions have surfaced about the cost of this visibility, extractive research and collecting practices, and inequitable power dynamics between institutionally located research and archival practices and minoritised community members.

This guide elaborates on ethical practice in relation to queer archival research, focusing on how the concept of "radical empathy" (Caswell & Cifor, 2016) can inform interactions with queer archives throughout the lifecycle of an archive research project. Proponents of radical empathy argue for archivists to be "seen as caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility" (Caswell & Cifor, 2016, p. 24). The guide elaborates on radical empathy in practice in relation to finding, using, and connecting with queer archives. I will argue that, when applied to research encounters, radical empathy enables researchers to make decisions informed by care, empathy, and commitment to structural change, resulting in justice-led research outputs.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this guide, readers should be able to …

- Identify key ethical considerations when designing projects involving the use of queer archives.

- Evaluate potential issues relating to finding and describing existing representations of queer lives in archives, enabling the development of a more risk-aware project plan for research projects.
- Engage reflexively with their own positionality and the emotional dimensions of archival research.

How-to Guide

Introduction

Archival research refers to research methods concerned with collections of "texts of different kinds, including but not confined to words on paper, visual materials or physical objects, and it involves analysing and interpreting these so as to explore a particular topic" (Moore et al., 2017, p. 3). The use of archives as sources has long been a dominant method in specific disciplinary settings (Dobson & Ziemann, 2020). However, over recent decades interest in archives and the concept of "the archive" has grown substantially, which has resulted in a diversity of methodological approaches to working with archives. This growth is often attributed to the archival turns across disciplines, including cultural theory (Ketelaar, 2017), social sciences (Moore et al., 2017) and organisational studies (Barros et al., 2018).

The archival turn in scholarship resulted in several significant shifts in how archives are both viewed and used in research. Ketelaar (2017) described these shifts as twofold:

1. Archives are sites of knowledge and cultural production, which are produced through processes (archiv*ing*) (Ketelaar, 2017). This is exemplified by activist archival research which harnesses the power of turning "'recordkeeping' itself into a civic/political tool and even, a means of production" (Gómez & Vallès, 2020, p. 272).
2. The use of "archive" as a metaphor within which specific texts, materials, and objects are assigned symbolic value by researchers (Ketelaar, 2017).

Studies about queer archives/archiving have developed amid these archival turns and reorientations. As Freeman writes, the nature of queer records encompasses "records that are used in the doing of queer history—they might document a queer person, a queer action, or an authority's suspicion or 'accusation' that someone was queer" (Freeman, 2023, p. 454). The

archival turn has enabled scholars to interrogate the nature of queer records, arguing for the integration of "peculiar" forms of records, which queer our understanding of the archive (McKinney & Mitchell, 2019, p. 11). The queer archive, in line with the second shift identified by Ketelaar, exists in diverse and often unconventional formats, including anonymous digital maps (Watson et al., 2023), tattooing (Rosenberg & Sharp, 2018), social media accounts (Ahmadbeigi, 2022) and pornography (Barriault, 2010). Scholars have also sought to examine the formation, processing, and management of queer archives (Caswell & Cifor, 2019; Freeman, 2023). Community-led queer archives are analysed as both sources and organisations, allowing for the opportunity to critically consider the formation of collections and the politics underpinning their establishment (Brown, E. H., 2020; Lee, 2020; Taves Sheffield, 2020). Following the lead of queer theorists, scholars have also explored how archival processes and roles can be queered (Lee, 2017; McKinney & Mitchell, 2019).

As this body of scholarship have developed over time, researchers have identified the critical importance of ethical practice in this area. This is only increasing whilst living in a society in which LGBTQ+ communities are subject to increasing harm, despite prior advances in legal rights (Spade, 2015). As archival research is one way in which individuals and communities become visible in new arenas, it is important for all parties involved in archival research (for instance, archive workers, researchers, and archive creators) to ethically evaluate the opportunities and threats associated with increased visibility. This is particularly—but not exclusively—important when working with records relating to individuals who are still alive (Latham, 2019). This guide elaborates on ethical practice in relation to queer archival research, focusing on how the concept of "radical empathy" (Caswell & Cifor, 2016) can inform interactions with queer archives throughout the lifecycle of an archive research project.

Radical Empathy

In "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives" Caswell and Cifor argued that archivists should be "seen as caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility" (Caswell & Cifor, 2016, p. 24). Radical empathy is proposed as an alternative way to frame the various responsibilities archival professionals have to those who are represented in records, those use who records, those who create archives, and the communities for whom "the use of records has lasting consequences" (Caswell

& Cifor, 2016, p. 39). The management and provision of records has previously been framed through a rights-related responsibilities, which emphasise "abstract legal and moral obligations of archivists" (Caswell & Cifor, 2016, p. 42). Radical empathy, in contrast, emphasises emotional labour, care, and structural change as transformative to the archival endeavour.

Radical empathy had subsequently informed scholarship exploring feminist archives (Watts, 2017), displaced archives (Lowry, 2019), queer archives (Ahmadbeigi, 2022), music archives (Cantillon et al., 2017), and colonial archives (Agostinho, 2019), in which authors assert the need for ethics and care-informed approaches to archival practice. Although initial scholarship focuses on radical empathy as an important professional competency for archivists, within this guide I will argue that this concept can also be applied by researchers undertaking archive-focused research.

The following sub-sections explore research activities relating to archives, identifying how research into queer archives can be transformed through a framework of radical empathy. I address the application of radical empathy within finding, using, and connecting with queer archives. As Arroyo-Ramírez et al. argue, radical empathy is "bound by its insistence on uprooting structural harms … [and] making intentional shifts and actions with the aim of transforming our systems" (Arroyo-Ramírez, 2021, p. 3). Research–much like archival practice—has the potential to cause harm when done unethically. Queer research often requires engagement with alternative community-driven understandings of ethics (Detamore, 2010). Rather than attempting to establish distance between researcher, archive creator, record subject, and archive workers–which is often an "institutional expectation" of researchers (Detamore, 2010, p. 181)—I will argue that researching through empathy, intimacy, and prolonged examination of positionality enables the production of more ethically-engaged and just archival research.

Finding Queer Archives

Locating records of queer lives is often the first stumbling block encountered by an archival researcher. There are multiple, complex structural factors which produce these absences. Researching with radical empathy necessitates self- and structural examination (Arroyo-Ramírez et al., 2021, p. 4). This section focuses on structural examination in encounters with queer archives, focusing on three factors–legacies of criminalisation, archival language and description, and visibility–each of which shape our ability to locate queer records.

Firstly, absence of queer records is a consequence of a legacy of criminalisation and persecution of LGBTQ+ communities. As Freeman writes, the "historic need to be covert in order to remain safe has left us with a limited body of evidence of queer lives" (Freeman, 2023, p. 448). What does persist may be held in institutional repositories (Watts, 2018). State-run repositories have gathered such records "*not* because they evidence the lives and experiences of queer people, but because they evidence the activities of government" (Freeman, 2023, p. 453). For example, evidence of queer spaces was commonly collected by state officials charged with prosecuting individuals for hosting or attending said spaces. This requires researchers to read archives with and again their grain (Stoler, 2010)–to consider not only what they see but the context in which that record was accumulated.

Secondly, the discoverability of queer collections is also affected by how archival records are described in catalogues. Much like the decision about what to collect, archive organisations make decisions about the extent to which an archive is catalogued, and these decisions are informed by the biases of those managing collections. Archival description is an everyday process in which archive workers create catalogue records for a collection, series, or item in an archive. Freeman situates description as "a process of mapmaking: the creation of a representation of the archive—a tool for orientation and navigation" (Freeman, 2023, p. 449). Archival description is a political and subjective act (Charlton, 2017). Professional standards and controlled vocabularies inform archival description work–however, these too should be viewed as constructed tools which are informed by the (Western, heterosexual, white, male) biases of their creators. For example, Library of Congress Subject Headings (a controlled vocabulary) has been the source of substantial critique by information professionals for implicit homophobia and racism (Johnson, 2008). The person who creates the catalogue record is also situated by their identity and cultural background, and without cultural competence, cataloguers may reproduce outdated (or even offensive) language or fail to understand linguistic conventions (Han & Han, 2021).

The language used to refer to queer individuals and communities can also obscure records from a researcher. Queer linguistic scholars situate language as political, fluid, and evolutionary (Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013). The words used to describe queer people in records *and* catalogue entries are informed by the time in which the record was created. As such it is common to encounter homophobic slurs, outdated language, and to find discrepancy between how

individuals described their identity and how a researcher might describe that individual now. This is particularly apparent when consulting historic records about gender nonconforming individuals, who navigated their relationship to their identity before trans identity was articulated (Rawson, 2009, p. 131). As such researchers will need to build their own list of keywords to employ systematically in searches of archive catalogues (Freeman, 2023, p. 457) or develop alternative discovery strategies to identify relevant materials.

Finally, not all catalogue records are published online. This can be due to logistical factors relating to resource levels or prior ethical decisions relating to the appropriate level of visibility for a catalogue record. The tension between individual privacy and access to information is a central ethical tension in the information profession (Poole, 2020). Archival professionals will make decisions about the level of detail that is disclosed about a collection, and whether that information is published online. This is particularly important when working with records relating to living individuals and criminalised communities (Ferris & Allard, 2016; Watts, 2017). As Allard and Ferris write, "the decision not to digitise–or to digitise such collections selectively–is… often deeply political" (Ferris & Allard, 2016, p. 197). It is also necessary whilst archiving and researching amidst a cultural climate of constant escalating transphobia (Pearce et al., 2020), the consequences of which include targeted victimisation and harassment of trans and queer activists in both on- and off- line environments (Lerner et al., 2020) and legal prosecution of activists (e.g., Reynolds, 2023). It is therefore important to consider whether individuals may have place access restrictions on their archives when depositing records with a service and liaise with services directly in addition to searching online catalogues.

Section Summary

- There are structural conditions which underpin the absences of queer lives from archival collections.
- When starting research, it is necessary to anticipate issues relating to locating queer archives and to build alternative discovery strategies into a project plan. These could include, for example, developing a list of alternative keywords to aid in searching.
- Whether directly or indirectly applicable, it is important to critically consider the conditions under which records were created, collected, and made available.

Using Queer Archives

Once data has been gathered from an archival collection, and a researcher has considered the structural circumstances in which that collection was produced, radical empathy can inform how records are used in subsequent analysis. When *using* records in research, radical empathy can inform how we relate to those represented in and affected by archival collections. Caswell and Cifor's application of radical empathy within archival practice is informed by a legacy of critical feminist attention to research ethics, which emphasises the importance of attending to lived experience, power differences, and relationships within research projects (Moore et al., 2021). When applied to archival practice, Caswell and Cifor assert archivists—and researchers, as I argue—are not "liberal autonomous individuals" but instead are bound "in a web of relationships" across the divisions of user, archivist, record subject, record creator, and broader community (2016, pp. 41–42). The archivist and researcher have "an affective responsibility to responsibly empathise with each of the stakeholders" (Caswell & Cifor, 2016, p. 41). This section centres relationality and empathy in relation to working with queer archives, focuses on three points of application: mutual benefit, consent, and accountability

Mutual Benefit

Radical empathy's emphasis on both care and structural position enables reconsideration of the exchange between researcher and the subject of research. Within community archives scholarship, researchers are criticised for a tendency to "parachute in and out … with a knowledge extraction mindset" (Caswell et al., 2021, p. 8). It is important to begin a section about use by also highlighting how research practice normalises the "use" of communities to extract knowledge and build individual and institutional expertise. Although archive sources, especially those relating to deceased individuals, can feel disembodied to a researcher, many queer archives either document living histories *or* have a potential impact on a minoritised community within current society. Records might be held in unfunded or precarious community-led organisations. Academic research can produce discrepancies in power, prestige, and privilege, even when researchers aim to "do good by good work" or bring justice to previously maligned histories (Cowan & Rault, 2018, p. 134).

By virtue of emphasis on subverting power dynamics, radical empathy is antiextractive in politics (Brown, E. H., & Beam, 2022, p. 33). Instead, scholars emphasise working practices which embed mutual benefit and equity through the research lifecycle. What counts as equity is dependent on the dynamics of a research relationship–however, published case studies suggest concrete actions could include shared-decision making, compensation, shared credit via coauthorship (Brown, E. H., & Beam, 2022; Caswell et al., 2021; Cowan & Rault, 2018). Although this relates more to research working with queer-led archive organisations, it is important for researchers working with archives as sources to consider whether, and if so, how the community in question will benefit from the increased visibility in academic spheres.

Consent

Consent is a key aspect of archival practice and research ethics. However, in both areas there are points of critical tension in relation to differences between community-based consent models and institutional models, which are, as Caswell et al. write, based on "a one-time transaction" rather than "ongoing relational forms of consent that reflect the values of … communities" (Caswell et al., 2021, p. 10). In addition, in archives, terms of access to archives can be (and routinely are) created without the input of people represented within records if they are not the creator of the archive (Galloway, 2021). This creates points of ethical tension between archivists, record subjects, and communities represented within records created by others.

Relational consent is proposed as an alternative and community-driven framework for obtaining consent (Caswell et al., 2021, p. 11). This might incorporate, for example, multiple layers of consent when more than one individual is represented in a record, or when the record creator and record subject are different. If working directly with participants (for example, workers at a queer community-led archive), a researcher could incorporate regular check-ins with participants throughout a research interaction, which "demonstrates genuine care and respect for the other person's well-being across space and time and acknowledges that levels of consent may shift depending on context" (Caswell et al., 2021, p. 11). This also creates the opportunity for participants to engage in dialogue, raise concerns, and withdraw from research collaborations. Brown and Beam also suggest that more robust consent models can underpin archival deposits, allowing for different arrangements with regards to different uses of an archival records (e.g., for

online publication, to archive an interview, to provide public access) (Brown, E. H., & Beam, 2022, p. 41).

Accountability

Secondly, radical empathy requires researchers to evaluate mitigate risk of harm and be accountable for harm caused by their research. For example, harm can happen as a consequence of enhancing online visibility of an individual or community in research (Boutchma, 2017; Caswell et al., 2021). Although visibility can be affirming in specific circumstances (Brown, E. H., & Beam, 2022, p. 33), there are "real harms associated with the identification of individual persons" (Caswell et al., 2021, p. 12)–for example, record subjects may be exposed to increased harassment or violence. Digital remediation of archival records or offensive language in catalogue entries through research can also contribute to increasing stigmatisation of a community represented in a record.

As Caswell et al. write, "accountability means that there are consequences for any harm done or trust broken" (Caswell et al., 2021, p. 15). One way in which researchers can be accountable when working with living histories or with community-led archives is to build reporting mechanisms into projects through which they are able to evaluate a research relationship with community members (Caswell et al., 2021, p. 20). When working with sources, it is often not possible to check in with record subjects or creators–in which case researchers must evaluate the potential for their actions to cause harm, particularly considering the impact of heightened visibility or remediation of an archival record in other spheres. As Caswell and colleagues write, "the safety of a vulnerable community is more important than any research objective" (Caswell et al., 2021, p. 20)–working with radical empathy guiding these decisions may result in choices not to include records, to anonymise data, or to make narrative changes to protect a minoritised group.

Section Summary

- Ethical use of archives requires researchers to view themselves as relationally bound to record creators, record subjects, and the broader community represented in a record/archive.
- Researchers need to consider not only institutional responsibility to acquire informed consent but how to embed ongoing dialogue about consent into their research practice.

- Research has the potential to cause harm to communities, especially when conducted in an extractive fashion. It is important to consider both how to be accountable for any harm caused and to consider how to make research mutually beneficial, for example, through compensation, shared credit, and/or shared decision-making.

Connecting with Queer Archives

Archival practitioners have historically trained "to divorce our identities and act impartial and unfeeling" (Arroyo-Ramírez et al., 2021, p. 2) in order to be perceived as professional. In turn, researchers are expected to forge an "objective distance" (Pearce, 2020, p. 814) between themselves and their research topic, even when researching a community as an insider. However, the notion of neutrality is questioned by critical theorists in both contexts. In archival theory, Ramirez argues that neutrality and objectivity are "semantic markers" (Ramirez, 2015, p. 352) for whiteness which serve to assert dominance within the archival profession. Critical feminist theorists have similarly argued that "illusory scholarly objectivity" (Schuchter, 2019, p. 335) is antithetical to ethical practice, instead asserting the need for "a relational mode of being in the archive that refuses to erase the researcher… and instead wants to acknowledge the lived experience on and off the paper" (Schuchter, 2019, p. 335). Radical empathy advocates for a combination of relational research practice and routine self-examination (Arroyo-Ramírez, 2021).

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Relationships are formed through the processes that result in the production and use of archival sources—as Arroyo-Ramírez writes, when "we place less focus on the records themselves… [we] centralize our relationships with the records' creators, subjects, users, and communities, and each other as archivists" (Arroyo-Ramírez, 2021, p. 12). These relationships are routinely made invisible in both archival practice and in research to make the resulting outputs appear valid and neutral. However, Moore et al. propose that "the meeting of researcher and archive can be seen in terms of 'an encounter'" (Moore et al., 2017, p. 24). Archives are shaped through prior labour, in which archivists will make decisions about what to keep and what to discard through a process of appraisal. In turn, archival researchers are themselves subjective beings, with factors including identity, prior relationships, and cultural background shaping "their own sense of what is important, interesting, and how it should be pursued" (Moore et al., 2017, p. 24).

Working relationally requires researchers to engage in routine self-examination. Reflexivity–defined by Barros et al. as "the process by which researchers place themselves and their practices

under scrutiny, recognising the ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process, and the influence that it has on knowledge generation" (Barros et al., 2018, p. 281) - can be used as a strategy to document and critically analyse the relationship between a researcher and an archive. In application to primary source analysis using archival sources, reflexivity involves accounting not only for the researcher's role in shaping a historical narrative but also the analysis the multiple narratives through which archives are constructed and shaped by outside forces (e.g., a creator of a record or an archive, the archivist). This can involve, for example, keeping a research journal, documenting process and position transparently within publications, including position notes in catalogue entries, and actively acknowledging the inherent subjectivity of research narratives. These steps are all ways in which researchers and practitioners can enact care by using reflexivity to orient and support readers and users of the outputs of our work (Brown, E. H., & Beam, 2022).

It is also important to anticipate the emotional impact of researching queer archives. Queer archives, as scholars have identified, are archives of feeling in which records and cultural texts are interwoven with memory of trauma (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7). Researchers will experience "affective entanglement with the papers" in archive collections (Schuchter, 2019, p. 332). When processing traumatic records, archivists can experience secondary (or vicarious) trauma (Sloan et al., 2019). Researchers working with minoritised communities or archival sources representing them can share these experiences, especially when histories of oppression are shared between the researcher and their research context (Pearce, 2020). Researchers can anticipate the emotional demand of working with queer archives by building support mechanisms into their research plans. This is described by Pearce as an ethical responsibility to the self (Pearce, 2020, p. 817), and might incorporate discussions with friends, therapy, or withdrawing from settings which transcend a researcher's professional and leisure life (Fife, 2022).

Section Summary

- Neutrality and objectivity, although normalised as professional values in both research and archival practice, are problematised by critical theorists for disguising power discrepancies and labour underpinning the shaping of archives and historical narratives.
- Working with radical empathy requires researchers to consider the impact of their work on record subjects, archive/record creators, archivists, and the broader community represented in a record.

- It is essential for researchers to engage in self-examination both to situate their own position in relation to archival research and to protect their emotional well-being throughout a project.

Conclusion

Queer archives are the subject of a growing body of research engaged with archival sources, archival practices, and archive organisations. As the angles from which queer archives are analysed have diversified, scholars have identified new ethical complexities and points of tensions between community-driven and institutional understandings of ethics, consent, and validity. Working with queer archives necessitates institutionally located researchers to *both* navigate institutional processes *and* to pursue justice through developing alternative community-centred ways of working which prioritise the needs and well-being of the many stakeholders implicated by an archival record (record subject; record creator; archivist; broader community). This is a particularly pressing concern in "contemporary landscapes marked by … [homophobic and] antitrans violence" (Brown, E. H., & Beam, 2022, p. 48).

Working with queer archives in research is not easy–however, when research relationships are equitable, archival work and research can enable "emotional justice" (Brown, E., et al., 2022, p. 49) which works to encourage the survival of individuals and communities in the present through intimate connections with the past. Radical empathy is a concept which can orient and guide researchers through the research lifecycle, and which, when employed carefully, has the potential to enable justice. By working relationally, embedding care and empathy into all interactions with records, examining the self, and resisting the production of inequity through research, future research in this area will resist extractive traditions and instead work with/in and alongside queer communities.

Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. How can a researcher respond to linguistic barriers to finding queer records in archives?
    a. Build a list of keywords including outdated or offensive language for queer communities – CORRECT
    b. Raise a complaint with the archive organisation
    c. Exclude catalogue records which do not use modern language from search results

2. Which of the following values is criticised by proponents of radical empathy?
    a. Neutrality – CORRECT
    b. Subjectivity
    c. Reflexivity
3. What is reflexivity?
    a. A process to identify potential harm caused through research
    b. The process in which researchers scrutinise their own identity and the impact it has on research practice – CORRECT
    c. A document submitted to the research ethics committee at a university
4. Which of the following refers to the process of creating catalogue entries for an archive collection?
    a. Appraisal
    b. Access
    c. Archival description – CORRECT
5. What phrase is used to describe a person represented in an archival record?
    a. Record creator
    b. Record subject – CORRECT
    c. Records manager

Further Reading

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Web Resources

The following are examples of community-led archival projects whose working practices are informed by politics of care and radical empathy.

- Queer Zine Archive Project: https://gittings.qzap.org/
- Sex Work Activist Histories Project: https://swahp.ca/
- Trans Memory Archive: https://archivotrans.ar/

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