

BRAVERMAN PRIZE ESSAY

BECOMING RESPONSIBLE MEDIATORS: The Application of Postmodern Perspectives to Archival Arrangement & Description

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As a critical theory, postmodernism refers to a critique of Enlightenment rationalism and universalism which emphasizes the role of underlying structures and power relationships in the construction of truth and knowledge. While most academic disciplines and allied professions have been contending with the challenges of postmodernism since at least the 1970s, archival theory and practice has, for the most part, remained squarely rooted in earlier traditions of nineteenth-century positivism. Although the precise reason for the profession's intellectual isolation is unclear, it is perhaps reasonable to assume, as Elisabeth Kaplan does, that by working in relative obscurity for such a large portion of their history, archivists have managed to avoid the external scrutiny and internal pressures to which other disciplines have long been subjected (217). In recent years, however, the increased presence of archives on the Internet, their participation in collaborative bibliographic networks, and the expansion of access to archival holdings, has led to greater visibility and use while giving impetus to a reevaluation of traditional principles and practices. To be sure, some postmodernist ideas have gained ground within the profession, specifically with regard to selection and appraisal where even some of the greatest skeptics have been forced to recognize the apparent subjectivity of deciding which records will be kept and which will be discarded.¹ However, postmodernism has made significantly less headway in the area of arrangement and description, where many established orthodoxies still reign. The failure to question the presumed objectivity of these practices as well as the influential role of archivists in shaping the human record raises serious questions about the issue of social responsibility. Accordingly, the aim of this essay is

to offer a review of postmodern perspectives on archival arrangement and description and explore how they can be employed to enhance social responsibility within the archival profession. In particular, this essay attempts to demonstrate how postmodern ideas can be applied to archival practice by reformulating basic principles of arrangement and description, adding creative modifications to the finding aid, and establishing responsible guidelines for the development of descriptive standards.

Postmodernism and the Archival Paradigm Shift

Although the precise definition of “postmodernism” has been a frequent point of contention, most would agree that its most basic characteristic can be described as an “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard, xxiv). In other words, postmodernism eschews any and all sweeping explanations premised on some version of monolithic human experience. In contrast, postmodernists emphasize the diversity of human experience and the multiplicity of perspectives arising therefrom. At its root lies a rejection of modernist positivism and its allied Enlightenment concepts of rationality, objectivity, and universal Truth. The postmodernist sees in the modernist project an attempt by the powerful to subject subordinate social groups to hegemonic ideologies that ultimately serve its interests. To counter this, postmodernists seek to recover the voices of the marginalized – those whose values, experiences, and worldviews give lie to the metanarrative.

The “grand myths of Western civilization” have been declared dead – but why? As Terry Cook explains, postmodern skepticism coincided with the advance of globalization and the fragmentation of what was once thought to be universal human experience.

The globalization of media and commerce, their enabling world-wide communications of computerized networks and telecommunication satellites, the resultant information explosion in the wired world of instant 24/7 work and recreation, and a concomitant information fragmentation into hundreds of channels, thousands of niche markets, and millions of Web pages – all of these challenge the very possibility of metanarrative (23).

As our awareness of and engagement with the rest of the world increases, so too does our awareness of other voices, worldviews, and realities. In short, society has become more cognizant of what postmodernists simply refer to as the “Other” – “those beyond itself, those whose race, class, gender, or sexual orientation may be different from its own, those who in a globalized community it can no longer ignore when constructing its own identities and composing its own narratives” (Cook, 23). As a result,

many have come to recognize the major metanarratives of the past as offering, at best, partial and incomplete views of social reality. From the postmodernist perspective, every discourse, every text, every document, every artifact, is just one representation of reality; one narrative among many, and inevitably, one constructed by the most powerful elements in society. Nothing is neutral and nothing is objective.

Needless to say, these conclusions have shaken the very roots of academia as theorists from all disciplines seek to reevaluate previously unquestioned assumptions and reformulate first principles. In postmodern parlance, this often takes the form of “deconstruction,” an attempt to de-naturalize that which was previously assumed to be natural. What was once perceived as natural, self-evident, or just plain normal is revealed to be socially and culturally constructed and thus in need of deconstruction and reformulation to better reflect the diversity of human subjectivity. Through deconstruction, postmodernism restores to human perception a sense of ambiguity, fluidity, and multiplicity of perspective that is critical to new, globalized ways of seeing (Cook, 24-25).

Postmodern criticism drives through the very heart of archival theory, discrediting many its central tenets regarding the nature of records, the presumably unobtrusive role of the archivist, the meaning of provenance, and the character of arrangement and description. As a profession rooted in the earlier modernist framework, Cook warns that archives may be adhering to concepts and methodologies that are no longer viable in a postmodern world. Drawing on the theoretical model proposed by Thomas Kuhn, Cook suggests that the time is ripe for an archival paradigm shift.² Among the theoretical reformulations recommended for incorporation into the new postmodern archival paradigm are the following:

1. Records are not neutral representations of the past, but constructed products shaped by the subjectivity of their creators and contexts of their creation. Moreover, their meanings are neither fixed nor static, but dynamic and constantly evolving in response to changing contexts and uses.
2. Archivists are not passive, impartial custodians of the historical record, but its active interpreters and mediators. Their work determines the context in which records will be understood and used.
3. The focus of archival work must shift from revealing the content of records to revealing their contexts. Adequately documenting the provenance of records requires more than simply identifying the office of their creation, but also their social and cultural contexts, functions, and custodial history (including their history under archival custody).

4. The organization and narrative imposed on records by archival arrangement and description are not objective recreations of some prior existing reality, but representations shaped by the individual subjectivities of the archivist, the institutional requirements of the archives, and the broader cultural and intellectual climates in which they operate.

This is a tall order to be sure, and one that many archivists may be reluctant to accept, but as the remainder of this essay seeks to demonstrate, there are a number of ways in which these critical perspectives can be applied to the practice of arrangement and description in order to provide archivists and their users with the tools necessary for understanding records in a postmodern world.

*Reformulating First Principles:
Incorporating New Understandings of Arrangement and Description*

The first task of the postmodern archivist is to rethink established principles and reformulate them in ways that incorporate new understandings of arrangement and description. Postmodernist criticisms highlight three new ways of looking at arrangement and description – as metanarrative, as mediation, and as social construct. This section looks at founding principles of arrangement and description and the ways in which they can be reformulated to reflect these new understandings.

Arrangement and Description as Metanarrative

Respect des fonds, provenance, and original order are the core principles around which archivists have traditionally sought to arrange and describe records. Taken together, these principles hold that the records created and/or accumulated by a single person, family, or corporate body must be: a) described as one fonds; b) not mixed or combined with the records of any other creator(s); and c) maintained in the original order in which they were used. However, the increasing complexity of modern bureaucratic organizations and their record-keeping systems has presented major challenges to these principles. Modern records are often created, accumulated, and used by a variety of agencies and series of records frequently change custody from one organization to another. This makes the “one collection, one creator” idea of the record group untenable and necessitates an expansion of the conventional conception of provenance. As Wendy Duff and Verne Harris point out, each “new layer or generation of use adds to the provenance and changes the context of the record. All actors are a part of creation, and, therefore, all need to be documented” (271). Furthermore, it is clear that creation is but one aspect of a complex

provenance that also includes the context in which the records were created, the functions they were intended to document, and the record-keeping systems used to maintain and provide access to them.

By adhering to antiquated principles of arrangement and description, archivists fail to document the records' rich contextual relationships, variety of narratives, and multi-provenancial characteristics. In their place, archivists present simplified, monolithic representations of what, in actuality, are much more complex realities. Not only is the process highly selective and culturally subjective, but it also negates possible alternative arrangements and misleads the user into assuming that the archivist's order is natural and absolute. In short, the processes of arrangement and description construct a metanarrative of the record, which privileges one reading of the record – one version of reality – over all others.

Arrangement and Description as Mediation

In advocating the expansion of the concept of provenance, postmodernists go a step further to suggest that provenance also includes the ways in which archivists, themselves, shape the context of the record. Despite having been based on naïve views of the truth-value of records, respect des fonds and the concomitant principles of provenance and original order were well-intentioned attempts to limit potential meddling on the part of the archivist by preserving the physical and intellectual integrity of the records and, therefore, their authenticity and evidential value. But even the strictest adherence to these rules ultimately fails to curb the transformative impact of the archival process. As Tom Nesmith points out, the mere designation of something as “archival” attributes to it a special status and distinctive meaning. “This mediates reality not only by affecting what we can know about the past, but also by saying that this is what we need to know about it” (32). More than this, the way archivists arrange and describe records has a formidable impact on how those records will be interpreted by users. That is to say, if a record's meaning is fundamentally shaped by the processes of its creation, it is also shaped (or perhaps re-shaped) by the processes of its “archivalization.” In deciding what about a complex body of records accounts for meaningful order, determining its provenance, highlighting what is believed to be significant about its contents, and assigning names and access points, archivists shape the way those records will be understood and used by researchers. In the postmodern world, records can no longer be perceived as neutral windows to the past for, as Eric Ketelaar states, “the archives reflect realities as perceived by the ‘archivers’” (133).

Arrangement and Description as Social Construct

Yet, archivists do not construct representations of their holdings in isolation. Their understandings of the records, and therefore their representations of them, are also shaped by the wider social and cultural surroundings in which they operate. As we have seen, the principles of respect des fonds, provenance, and original order were all based on modernist perceptions of the nature of records. Indeed, archivists have long insisted that their methods of arranging and describing records are naturally derived from the character of the materials themselves. However, the postmodernist critique suggests that archival practices are in fact shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which they are imbedded. According to Richard Brown, “classifications never emerge solely from the material to be classified since our ways of defining the material itself are shaped by the dominant intellectual or political paradigms through which we view it” (25).

This process is readily apparent in archival description where the selection of descriptive terms and access points is shaped by the contextual constraints of language. “Language,” say Sharon Larade and Johanne Pelletier,

classifies and orders the world: it is a means of manipulating reality which has the potential to mislead, misguide, or deceive. Language reflects the inequalities and prejudices of human culture; it also reflects attitudes that demean or discriminate against sexual, ethnic, or cultural identities (99).

Librarians have been vocal on issues of bias in bibliographic description since the 1970s.³ A study conducted by Margaret Rogers in 1993 demonstrated how Library of Congress subject headings discriminated against women by promoting gendered stereotypes in occupational headings. Rogers suggested that the separate treatment given to women in occupational subject headings – such as “Women in politics,” “Women in engineering,” or “Women in management” – implied that it was unusual or perhaps even inappropriate for women to have these occupations (181). Furthermore, the absence of similarly distinct occupational headings for men indicated that it was presumed natural for men to assume these roles.⁴

Rogers’ work is an illustrative example of the way in which descriptive standards are shaped by the biases and worldviews of specific socio-historical contexts. However, the issue of bias in descriptions of holdings is not limited merely to libraries or to the topic of gender. Archivists (who often borrow subject headings from LCSH) are also guilty of using descriptive terminology that perpetuates social conventions of language which discriminate against certain sexual, ethnic, and social groups. As

Larade and Pelletier suggest, archivists must be able to identify and analyze the inequities of language and propose alternative, more representative constructs to the work of archival description. There will, of course, be those who view any effort to incorporate new descriptive language as “interference rather than as responsible mediation – as pushing archival objectivity and impartiality out the window” (Larade & Pelletier, 107). Yet, one could only hold such a view if one assumed language to be impartial in the first place.

Like other modes of classifying and organizing knowledge, cataloging and descriptive standards have been the historic product of a predominantly Western, white, Christian, heterosexual, male worldview; the applicability of which has recently been called into question by postmodernism. Accordingly, it is necessary for archivists to revisit the descriptions and assigned access points of their holdings to ensure their adequacy and representativeness.

By reformulating archival principles in ways that incorporate these new understandings of arrangement and description, archivists will be better able to construct more accurate representations of their holdings and enhance users’ understanding of records. Archivists must begin to articulate principles of arrangement and description that recognize the limits of the record group and original order, and expand the conception of provenance, thereby allowing archival work to highlight the fluid, polysemic, and multi-relational characteristics of the records. These principles must also demonstrate an awareness of the influential roles of archivists and the social contexts in which they conduct their work. An archival theory based on such principles would be better able to deal with arrangement and description as metanarrative, mediation, and social construct. The final sections highlight some practical applications for such a theory.

Archivist as Author, Finding Aid as Narrative

As we have seen, the process of archival arrangement and description does not simply reveal the meaning and significance of records, it actively participates in their construction. Thus, in the postmodernist view, the archivist is not the mere keeper of the record, but its co-creator. As Nesmith explains:

A record is a meaningful communication, which means it is a physical object, plus an understanding or representation of that object. Some of what makes a record meaningful is inscribed in it by those who literally made it, but most of what makes a record intelligible lies outside its physical borders in its context

of interpretation. Archivists, who do much to shape this context, therefore share in authoring the record (32).

The Jenkinsonian tradition of consigning the archivist to an invisible role did not limit the archivist's influence over the documentary record; it merely concealed it. Recognizing the influence of archivists means recognizing archivists as authors. Dealing with authorship entails accepting responsibility for the potential biases that may affect archival work. Thus, Duff and Harris conclude:

Just as archivists document the historical background, internal organizational or personal cultures, and various biases or emphases of record creators, they need also to highlight their own preconceptions that influence and shape the descriptions and consequently the meanings of the records they re-present to researchers (278).

If archivists are authors, then the descriptions they create are narratives; stories told about the record and its meaning. Postmodernists assert that records contain many potential stories. The power of the archivist, then, stems precisely from his/her position to decide which stories will be told. According to Duff and Harris, "descriptions inevitably privilege some views and diminish others. When archivists describe records, they can only represent a slice, or a slice of a slice ... of a record's reality" (278).

Michelle Light and Tom Hyry highlight these two factors – the lack of archival accountability and of multiplicity of perspective – as major flaws of conventional finding aids. In order to acknowledge both the inherent subjectivity of archival work and its mediating role in the production of meaning, the authors suggest two additions to the finding aid: colophons and annotations. Colophons are statements that provide contextual information pertaining to the creation of a text. Finding aid colophons create a space in archival description where archivists can acknowledge and explain their authorial role in the creation of the record. Providing users with information about the social background, personal history, and worldview of the processing archivist denaturalizes archival description and acknowledges its inherent subjectivity. Thus, finding aid colophons directly reflect an expanded conception of provenance, which addresses the role of the archivist in shaping the records' context.

The second descriptive modification proposed by Light and Hyry is the incorporation of finding aid annotations. Finding aid annotations allow for the airing of diverse perspectives about a collection. Rather than privileging a single narrative about a group of records (i.e., that of the processing

archivist), Light and Hyry suggest allowing reference archivists and users to annotate finding aids, thereby permitting the accumulation and capture of equally valid re-readings of the records. According to the authors, as reference archivists and researchers use a processed collection, they come to know more about the records and devise new interpretations of their meaning. Yet finding aids only reflect the first reading of the records, freezing their meaning in time and foreclosing the possibility of alternative interpretations (Light & Hyry, 228). By incorporating annotations into the finding aid, new readings can be gathered over time and a multiplicity of perspectives can be expressed. Annotations, therefore, reflect a postmodern understanding of description as dynamic, rather than static; as open, rather than closed.⁵

*Talk About Nailing Jelly to the Wall:
Creating Standards in the Collapse of Metanarrative*

If the subjective role of archivists is concealed by principles that articulate a misleadingly narrow view of provenance, it is further masked by descriptive standards that lend to description an “aura of objectivity” (Light and Hyry, 221). Much discussion in recent archival literature has focused on the need for greater standardization. While necessary for facilitating information exchange, promoting consistency of practice, and enhancing intellectual control of holdings, descriptive standards also reflect the particular biases, worldviews, and ideological traces of the social and cultural environment in which they were produced. As Rogers’ study of library subject headings demonstrated, the choices librarians and archivists make in selecting descriptive terms are laden with value judgments that reflect particular views of reality.

Descriptive standards also create a metanarrative of archives as they seek to establish rules to homogenize practices and make them uniform across institutions. In order for descriptive standards to function they must elevate one point of view over all others. This has a profound effect on access as well as description. Each concept, capable of being expressed in a variety of different ways, can only be assigned one authorized descriptor. These become the “metanames,” which all users are forced to use in order to access particular holdings, thereby shaping their understanding of them. In terms of description, archivists are pressed to correlate materials with appropriate descriptors no matter how ill-fitting the match. As Duff and Harris point out, “the greater the level of standardization the greater the violence done to the local, the individual, the eccentric, the small, the weak, the other, and the case which does not fit its conceptual boxes” (281).

However, as Duff and Harris suggest, the dangers associated with standardization do not mean archivists should avoid standards. For one

thing, the need for standardized terminology is inescapable and necessary in order to permit some level of descriptive consistency, inter-institutional cooperation, and efficient retrieval of records. Secondly, descriptive standards are one of the few direct means available for questioning and challenging traditional descriptive practices that, more often than not, replicate and sustain existing power relationships (Duff & Harris, 283). But how do archivists, living in the collapse of metanarrative and with new understandings of its socially constructed nature, create useable and responsible standards of description?

Resolving this seeming paradox lies in creating standards that are liberatory rather than oppressive. Accordingly, Duff and Harris suggest the following guidelines for developing responsible descriptive standards:

1. The standard must refrain from presenting itself as “natural.” The traces of its construction and the biases of its creators must be made explicit.
2. It must emerge from a process that is inclusive and transparent thereby ensuring accountability.
3. It must affirm a process of open-ended making and remaking of the record.
4. It must consider the needs of diverse user groups by allowing different ways of searching, interrogating, organizing, and interpreting records.
5. It must require engagement with the marginalized and the silenced and create spaces for sub-narratives and counter-narratives.
6. It must seek ways of troubling its own status as a metanarrative by embracing ‘a politics of ambiguity and multiplicity’ and opening spaces for other tellings and re-tellings of competing stories (285).

A descriptive standard that follows these principles would demonstrate an awareness of all three postmodern understandings of arrangement and description – as metanarrative, as mediation, and as social construct.

Conclusion: On Becoming Responsible Mediators

This essay has sought to offer a review of postmodern theories of arrangement and description and demonstrate how they can be used to enhance social responsibility within the archival profession. In particular, we have looked at how the reformulation of traditional principles, modification of the finding aid, and the development of liberatory descriptive standards can be applied in order to enrich users’ understanding of our holdings and increase professional responsibility. Above all, this

essay has sought to encourage archivists to recognize and embrace the mediating role they play in shaping the historical record. Embracing mediation does not mean accepting relativism, dismissing ethics, or repudiating professional standards. It means coming to terms with our subjectivity, tolerating ambiguity, decentralizing power over the record, and accepting accountability for our decisions.

Archivists must realize that there are serious limitations to the way we have traditionally carried out our work – limits to the truth-value of records; to the conceptions of record group, provenance, and original order; to archival neutrality and objectivity; and to our ability to create representative portrayals of the past. However, we need not be disheartened for the realization of these limitations brings with it new possibilities – new ways of understanding arrangement and description; new formulations of old principles; new voices, stories, and contextual relationships waiting to be documented; and new ways of engaging our users and presenting our work to the public. There are no doubt some who would say that accepting mediation entails the creation of an alien and potentially dangerous role for the archivist. However I would argue that by refusing to accept mediation, we irresponsibly refuse to acknowledge a role that already exists.

NOTES

1. The influence of postmodern theories in this area of practice is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in experimentation with techniques such as macroappraisal and documentation strategies.
2. In his renowned book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Kuhn argued that radical changes occur in any scientific theory when the answers normally proffered to explain occurrences no longer sufficiently explain current phenomena. In order to adapt themselves to new and changing realities, such theories must inevitably undergo a paradigm shift. See: Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
3. Sanford Berman's *Prejudices and Antipathies* (1971) was among the first published works that agitated against racial, gender, and ethnic biases in library subject headings. See: Berman, Sanford. *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1971.
4. It should be noted that a cursory analysis of Library of Congress subject headings in 2005 demonstrates that many of these gendered distinctions are still very much in use in library cataloging.
5. While some archivists may be horrified by the idea of allowing non-professionals a hand in archival description, the fact of the matter is that they have been doing for years. In many repositories processing is often done by non-professionals, untrained employees, and student assistants. Allowing experienced researchers who not only have actual hands-on experience with the collection materials but subject expertise as well, would just as likely improve the quality of description as diminish it.

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