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Historical Research and Archival Sources

9

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Despite heightened levels of interest in qualitative research methods, human geographers have tended to overlook one of the oldest of qualitative techniques: historical approaches based on the study of primary documents. The interrogation of archival sources is an essential technique for most historical geographers, and while other human geographers have been willing to incorporate a historical dimension into their work (Driver 1988), they do not necessarily have any archival research skills. Human geographers more generally can benefit from having some appreciation of these skills, for they can be deployed for contemporary as well as historical research.

INTRODUCTION

After 30 years of working as a historical geographer, I still relish the opportunity to undertake archival research. There is a continuing sense of delving into the unknown, of engaging in academic detective work trying to understand inevitably fragmentary and partial surviving **records**, of striving to make sense of the evidence you are scrutinizing. My own introduction to **archival research** was orchestrated only at the graduate level. To a large degree, I was able to learn by trial and error, following the tendency of historical geographers at the time to regard archival research as part of their craft, something to be acquired on the job. Good archival scholarship was to be inferred from reading journal articles or books by leading historical geographers and from discussions with supervisors. In many ways, this was a laudable model, one that allowed me to develop my skills and understanding at my own pace, but geography students of today wishing to use archival sources can benefit from a more overt discussion of the fundamentals of archival research. This is also the case because archival research

needs to engage with larger disciplinary theory and the research ethics that are also a part of historical inquiry. Even so, like other methods, archival skills can to some extent only be learned by doing archival research. Expertise improves with experience, and this is not easily reduced to a checklist of best practice.

What Is Archival Research?

> Archival scholarship at its best, it seems to me, is an ongoing, evolving interaction between the scholar and the voices of the past embedded in the documents. [Harris 2001, 332]

Archival sources are a subset of what historical geographers and historians refer to as **primary sources**. They include non-current records of government departments held in public **archives** but can be extended to include company records and private papers. As well as **documents**, handwritten and typed, these sources can embrace personal letters, diaries, logbooks, and minutes of meetings, as well as reports, plans, maps, and photographs. More recently, they have included records created in electronic format, which brings with it new challenges (Davison 2003). This chapter concentrates on official papers, including manuscript and typescript files.[1] Most of the comments are also applicable to company archives and private papers. With the target readership of this book in mind, the chapter concentrates largely on government archives, on the past century or so, and on the 'New World'. This focus simplifies the discussion, since much of this documentation is type-written and the language of the more recent past is relatively easy to comprehend today. As a collection of unique, single documents, created contemporaneously with the events they discuss, the materials lodged in archival repositories provide a particular window on the geography of earlier times. As such, they are a major source of valuable information for geographers. Historical approaches applied to archival sources will not allow all of the research questions of human geography to be addressed; however, they do provide a means of answering questions about the recent as well as the more distant past that are not recoverable by the other techniques or from other sources available to human geographers.

More often than not, the researcher will make use of public archives housed in a government agency charged with the preservation of non-current records. On other occasions, small regional collections, such as those associated with some museums, may be targeted. Sometimes, access to the records of private organizations may be sought. Michael Williams (1992) offers a concise summary of a range of archives from the national to the local. Increasingly, the web provides the initial contact point with research and archival collections. Box 9.1 lists some major repositories and their 'www' addresses. In addition, various specialized

archives, such as those dealing with women (Mason and Zanish-Belcher 2007) and others, capitalize on new technologies, taking the form of digital archives such as the Aluka Project, which brings together material on liberation struggles in southern Africa (see http://www.aluka.org) (Isaacman, Lalu, and Nygren 2005). The latter contains published and oral material and in that sense reflects a broader definition of 'archive' than I have adopted in this chapter.

For Mayhew (2003), historical geography has a two-fold significance for the discipline as a whole that lies beyond increasing the understanding of the geography of the past: to re-evaluate taken-for-granted concepts and to develop a comparative perspective so that as geographers we might more fully appreciate what is distinctive about today's world and how we understand it in disciplinary terms. Historico-geographical research based on archival research underpins both of these objectives.

Advice on Conducting Good Historical and Archival Research

> The first step in reconstruction of past stages of a cultural area is mastery of its written documents. [Sauer 1941, 13]

> It is an oversimplification to believe that the study of change through time by means of either historical documents or field evidence does not require special training and skills. [Perry 1969, 96]

Approaching Archival Research	Box 9.2

The first point to make about archival research is that it cannot be contained within a single methodology. Any sizable archive holds a vast array of material, and even if one's research questions are fairly specific, the chances are good that there will be far more potentially relevant documents than there will be time to examine them . . .

. . . [A]rchival research tends to gravitate towards one of two polar reactions—neither, I think particularly helpful. It is easy enough to be taken over by the archives, to attempt to read and record all their relevant information. In this way months and perhaps years go by, and eventually the investigator has a vast store of notes and usually, rather weak ideas about what to do with them. A fraction of the archives have been transferred from one location to another, while the challenges of interpretation have been postponed . . .

In effect the archives have swallowed the researcher. At the other pole are those who come to the archives with the confidence that they know precisely what they want. They have conceptualized their research thoroughly in advance. They pretty much know how they will argue their case and what their theoretical position is. But they do need a few more data, which is why they return to the archives. As long as they cleave to their initial position, either they will find that data they need and leave fairly quickly or they will not find them and also leave. Fair enough for certain purposes. But they are imposing their preconceptions on the archives. They have solved the problem of archival research by, in effect, denying the complexity of the archives and the myriad voices from the past contained in their amorphous record (Harris 2001, 330–1).

So where to begin? Good archival research is difficult to reduce to a checklist of points. However, it is useful to explore sequentially the sorts of things you might need to do and the obstacles that you might encounter in undertaking archival research. At the start, like any other research project, your work ought to be informed by prior in-depth reading on current scholarship around the topic but accompanied by an openness about the ultimate direction of the research. This point is well made by the highly accomplished Canadian historical geographer Cole Harris (Box 9.2).

Archival research begins before you arrive at the archive. You ought to be familiar with the existing **secondary literature** before beginning any search for archival material. For instance, for a project involving state agencies, it is important to read any previously published institutional histories as well as the annual reports of that agency and to look at parliamentary debates (or their equivalent). You should always write to any archives you intend to visit well beforehand and, if possible, obtain a letter of support from an academic supervisor. Outline your research topic in reasonable detail, indicate whether it is for a small project or

for a thesis, and signal what you are seeking to do and how much time you have at your disposal. With larger archives, you may be able to do this on-line. This preparatory work will help you to make best use of what is inevitably too little time. The **archivist**, with an intimate knowledge of both the ways the materials are organized and their contents, will be able to help you identify relevant files.

Archives are not like libraries, although there may be some similarities. They may operate on quite restricted hours. Some will require that you sign up for a reader's ticket (you may be able to do this electronically). You may also need to have someone vouch for you and to show some form of identification. If you can, you should check out the specific characteristics and requirements of the archives before you visit.

What should you take to the archives? Take related research notes, pencils, and paper. Most archives operate on a **'pencil only' rule** to minimize damage to the original documents should any be accidentally marked, although many researchers now bring their own laptop computers. Although most public archives will have supplies of scrap paper, I would also advise you not to depend on the archivists to supply stationery. Do not expect a small regional archive to supply pencils, to have a pencil sharpener, or to provide a convenient power outlet for your computer.

Sometimes ingenuity is called for in that you may only be able to address research questions obliquely. The archivists can sometimes provide helpful, expert advice about record sets that you may not have considered useful. Typically, as a new user you will be given the opportunity to explain what you are researching and why. The archivist will tell you how the **finding aids** work and can offer suggestions about where to start looking. Their experience and expertise can often prove invaluable, but it is important to remember that they may have limited time available to offer help to individual researchers.

A crucial difference between a library and an archive lies in the way that each stores material and in the nature of the finding aids. Libraries typically catalogue books and journals by either the 'Dewey Decimal' or the 'Library of Congress' classification systems that group together all books on similar subjects. In contrast, public archivists seek to maintain the integrity of the record sets they obtain from government departments or other agencies in terms of preserving specific files' place in the broader record set, maintaining the original ordering of documents in the file, providing storage conditions that will ensure the long-term survival of the records, and making them available to the public. Archivists place great emphasis on the **provenance** of the **files**; the actual order of the material within the files in itself tells the researcher something about the situation that prevailed when the file was being created.[2] Thus, whereas in a library you can refer to a catalogue to find a book on a particular subject on an open shelf, in an archive basic paper-based finding aids take the form of sequential **series lists** of all the files held by particular agencies. These lists itemize all the files created

by an organization using the original description system (usually numerical but some time alpha-numerical).

In many major archives, electronic searching of the collections is now possible. This means that you can search for specific items in the same way, superficially at least, that you would use a library catalogue. In large archives, this procedure can reduce the amount of time you spend hunting for files and release extra time for actually reading the retrieved materials. However, this time-saving may come at the expense of your having any sense of the overall structure of the records. Do not forget about provenance. What survives in the file is likely to be only a fragment, and it may be quite partial in terms of providing any insights about the past. In many cases, however, particularly with small archives, you will have only the series list of files to guide you. The files remain organized according to the system that the original creating agency devised. Inevitably, you will find that some of the originating records staff have been more thorough and less idiosyncratic than others. The name of a file may not always be a clear guide to its contents, material may have been misfiled, and some files may have been lost or destroyed. For instance, I recently found that files marked 'railways accommodation' had nothing to do with housing, the topic I was working on, but actually referred to the number of passenger carriages and freight wagons that could be 'accommodated' at the railway station yards. Similarly, a file (mis)labelled as 'hoses' was actually about houses (here the file number provided the clue).

In some national collections, precious and fragile originals may have been electronically scanned or photographed and made available on-line or as microfilm copies (e.g., Hackel and Reid 2007). Again, it is important to check in advance as to whether you will be reading originals or copies of the documents that you plan to consult. Some sources have been much studied and are available in published form (e.g., Powell 1973). However, remember to use these sources critically, because they may have been edited to reflect the conventions and morals of a later age. For example, well-known New Zealand historian Bill Oliver had suspicions that the published correspondence of two prominent nineteenth-century New Zealand political families had been inadequately edited: 'upon inspecting the originals I found that the editor had not only made mistakes in the transcription (a venal sin) but has defaced the manuscript with overwriting and instructions to his typist a (a mortal sin or if it isn't it should be)' (Oliver 2002, 107). Just because some primary source material has been published in printed form does not mean that you can relax your critical judgment.

You may find that there is restricted access to some files. Personnel files typically fall within this category. The period during which restricted access applies varies from one country to another, but 30 years after the closing of the file is typical. In some instances, a lesser degree of restriction applies, and permission to look at files may be granted by a senior archivist, government official, or someone associated with the organization that created them. A formal written request

outlining your research project may result in the granting of access; however, some conditions may be attached—for example, you may be permitted to read only a particular portion of the material while the remainder of the file remains physically sealed. In other cases, the researcher has no choice but to wait patiently until the material is released.

Unlike material in a library, archived files are not kept on open shelves. They are not necessarily even kept at the same site as the reading room and may only be delivered from storage on request on an hourly basis or less frequently, so be prepared to have other tasks to occupy your time while you wait (for example, searching the finding aids for other files to call up). Photocopying material is usually possible, but it can be comparatively costly, and you may have to pay in advance. Some material may be deemed too fragile or, if bound, too difficult to photocopy. It is therefore advisable for you to find out what the policy is beforehand. Plans, maps, and charts larger than A3 size can be copied by means other than photocopying, but this is sometimes quite expensive. However, it may be the only means of obtaining a copy of an essential document. Some archives now permit researchers to make their own digital copies of documents. Various conditions apply, including registering your camera and completing associated documentation and agreeing not to use flashes or tripods or to fold documents. The use of digital images also raises new issues regarding labelling and storage if you are to make effective use of such materials (Box 9.3).

Digital Images　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　**Box 9.3**

It is now becoming more common for archivists to allow researchers to make their own digital images of material. This has obvious advantages in terms of the ability to make images of, for instance, bound volumes that would not have been photocopied because of concerns over preserving their binding. Digital images are also less expensive than photocopying, and they do not involve a lengthy delay in obtaining them, an important point for time-pressed students who cannot wait for an archival turnaround time of several weeks. However, I would be mindful of Harris's (2001) comment about transferring the archive from one location to another. Ease of copying in itself can create other difficulties if reference details are not kept meticulously. As a checklist, I would suggest the following points (nearly all of which I have fallen foul of over the past 12 months . . .):

1. Ensure that the memory card in the camera is clear and the battery charged.
2. When copying lengthy documents, be wary of making blurred images and of missing pages.

3. Recognize that you may require some maps and images reproduced with greater clarity than you can obtain with your hand-held camera, and be prepared to pay for photocopier or high-quality camera images.
4. Ensure that you have a reliable system for linking the digital image to the source file (my low-tech approach to this has been to include a slip of paper with the file details on it alongside the photographed page so that I have a visual reference on each digital image).
5. Store the digital images so that they can be located and retrieved easily.

When the archivist gives you the file to work on, you will find in most cases that new items are on top of the older material, particularly if the material is secured by paperclip. You will probably need to work from back to front. Will the material answer any of your research questions? It may be immediately obvious that the material is relevant to your inquiry, or it may appear only tangentially relevant or even irrelevant. Sometimes it is difficult to make a judgment at first glance, and you may have to recall material you have examined previously but whose significance you did not appreciate at the time. Alan Baker, a British historical geographer, has offered some guiding thoughts on evaluating primary sources, including archival materials (Box 9.4).

Assessing Evidence in Historical Geography Box 9.4

No source should be taken at face value: all sources must be evaluated critically and contextually. The history and geography of a source needs to be established before it can legitimately be utilized and incorporated into a study of historical geography. The historical sources we use were not compiled and constructed for our explicitly geographical purposes; they were more likely to have been prepared, for example, for the purposes of taxation and valuation, administration and control. We also have to understand not only the superficial characteristics of a specific source but also its underlying motivation, background and ideology of the person(s) who constructed it. In order to make the most effective and convincing use of a source we must be aware of its original purpose and context and thus its limitations and potential for our own project.

Source: Baker 1997, 235.

Baker's words seem to me to be crucial for those using archives as qualitative sources in human geography. It is essential to understand as fully as possible the original purpose of the document, who created it, what position they held, and how and when it was made. Some generic questions to pose when assessing documentary sources are laid out in Box 9.5.

Questions to Ask of Documentary Sources Box 9.5

1. Can you establish the authenticity of the source—is it genuine? Are you looking at the original?
2. Can you establish the accuracy of the document—how close is it to the source of events or phenomena? How accurately was the information recorded? (Cross-check with other sources.)
3. What was the original purpose for collecting the information? How might it have influenced what information was collected?
4. How has the process of archiving the information imposed a classification and order upon historical events?

Source: After Black 2006.

The questions raised in Box 9.5 provide a useful start, although I would make three qualifying points. First, it is possible to extend 'document' to include maps and plans (see Harley 1992). Second, this approach tends to privilege the ideas behind actions. That is to say, the past is being understood in idealist terms whereby the thought behind the action is regarded as providing the understanding necessary to interpret these events. Historical geography can be written legitimately from a viewpoint other than that of contemporary observers (Baker 1997). Third, the documents themselves cannot be read in isolation but must be understood in their wider context, and even then any conclusions will be provisional rather than absolute.

To some extent, all archival researchers develop individualized approaches to note-taking from archival materials. However, there are two basic strategies. The first involves collecting material by topic, noting specific details and suitably referenced quotations. Classically, historical researchers have made use of large index cards for this purpose, although many now use laptop computers to organize their notes. New topics can be noted on new cards as more files are read and new research questions formulated. The alternative approach is to record chronologically any pertinent information from each file and then subsequently identify themes that emerge across the files. Both strategies have advantages and disadvantages. The former depends on identifying key topics at the beginning of the project within which to collect information. Such an approach offers the ability to add new topics or identify dead ends and see how themes merge or diverge. My personal view is that while this approach means that many diverse sources are brought together, it can blur a researcher's capacity to make good inductive judgments. The latter method is more sensitive to the provenance of files and can give a clearer sense of the role of particular officials or departments. It does, however, involve a degree of double-handling in that evidence that has

already been collected by the researcher needs to be reorganized after each visit to the archives and perhaps annotated further. It is important to follow up other research questions that may emerge from this re-sorting process. The latter approach is one that I have used over many years. It suits me, and as a full-time academic, I can incorporate it into my way of working. I would acknowledge that it probably works best when one is working in an area where both the secondary literature and the archival sources are familiar to the researcher, even if the specific contents of the files are unknown. Students with a relatively short period of time available for archival research may prefer to adopt the first strategy and will probably be using laptop computers, particularly when they have the keyboard skills (speed and accuracy) that I lack!

After you have located and extracted archival evidence, it must be adequately cited in the written products of the research. The first step is to carefully record the specific document description and file reference. For example, the personnel file for Edward Phillips Turner, director of forests in New Zealand from 1928 to 1931, is located in the New Zealand Forest Service files at Archives New Zealand in Wellington. The specific reference is 'F Acc W2338 82/113 E.P. Turner'. The 'F' refers to the Forestry files, 'W2338' is the accession number for that collection of documents, 82 is the series, and 113 is the specific file number, while E.P. Turner is the descriptive label (a little confusing in that the individual in question always used the double-barrelled surname). There is considerable variation among filing systems. Many are much simpler than the one used in the example above. You need to quickly become familiar with the system used by the agency whose records you are working on, and here the expert assistance of the archivist can be invaluable. The crucial thing is to record the details carefully. This is important for two reasons. First, it enables you as a researcher to keep track of where you found specific information. Second, it enables a subsequent researcher to relocate the material. The idea is simple enough, but given the nature of archival material, it is somewhat more exacting than, for example, the standard bibliographic requirements of author, date, title, and publisher/place for a book in the reference list of a thesis. Citing archival materials correctly can also pose problems in that human geography has tended to adopt versions of in-text citation systems, such as Harvard (see Hay 2006). Most archival sources sit uncomfortably within this framework and are generally better referenced in footnotes or endnotes, typically used by historians. Students undertaking archival research may need to negotiate a variation from their university's social science–oriented formats for referencing.

The archive does not constitute the only source for historical research. For instance, newspapers, private papers, and unpublished memoirs may provide valuable material for cross-referencing with the archival record. As well, once archival work is completed, the researcher may need to follow up on unfamiliar key actors by checking old editions of *Who's Who* or newspaper obituaries, as well

as on unfamiliar organizations or period issues; here contemporary newspaper accounts can be invaluable. This 'post-archive' work can of course help to shape and inform the purpose of subsequent trips to the archive.

Moreover, files are not the end point of research, as US cultural geographer Carl Sauer reminded historical geographers nearly 70 years ago:

> Let no one consider that the historical geographer can be content with what is found in archive and library. It calls, in addition, for exacting fieldwork. One of the first steps is the ability to read the documents in the field for instance of an account of an area written long ago and compare the places and their activities with the present, seeing where the habitations were and the lines of communication ran, where the forests and the field stood, gradually getting a picture of the former cultural landscape behind the present one. [Sauer 1941, 13]

Although Sauer's words may indicate nostalgia for a pioneering rural past while your focus could just as easily be urban and social, his challenge remains pertinent and has only partially been taken up by more recent generations of geographers (for example, Raitz 2001).

CHALLENGES OF ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

There are two types of challenges facing researchers working with archives. The first is intellectual and the second technical. When dealing, for instance, with the file materials contained in an official government archive, it is important to bear in mind the sorts of power relations inherent in the surviving materials. This is rather more than just acknowledging that the surviving files are fragmented and partial. The records are those created by politicians and officials. They reflect the outlooks and understandings of the dominant groups in the national context at the time they were created. Duncan (1999) writes of these concerns in terms of complicity stemming from use of the 'colonial archive'. For much of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, these records were created largely by men in the upper echelons of society, and in colonial situations such as those in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, they are predominantly the records of colonizing British settlers. Summarizing the contents of files from the archives merely reproduces these uneven power relations rather than interpreting them. The records of nonofficial, community, or sporting groups may provide a way into understanding the concerns and aspirations of those who had no position in the public political sphere. In the same way, oral histories from the recent past may provide insights into gendered and minority concerns. Furthermore, an awareness of the power relations within the archival material

may allow the researcher to reinterpret surviving materials. For instance, what I once mapped as examples of illegal felling of forest in New Zealand in the 1870s I would now be inclined to understand as resistance on the part of Maori forest owners to the imposition of authority by the Crown and as the flouting of government regulations by timber-cutters who had limited alternative means of supporting themselves (see Chapter 2 for further discussion of power relations in qualitative research).

The most fundamental technical difficulty relates to the ability to actually read the documents retrieved in the archive. During the first half of the nineteenth century, many official documents were handwritten in **copperplate script**. This script looks elegant, but it can take some time for novices to learn to read it proficiently, a situation that may be exacerbated when officials wrote both across and along a page in order to save paper. Perseverance will pay off. Archives from the latter part of the nineteenth century are generally written in a **modern hand**. They are generally readable with a bit of effort, the main problems occurring with faint letterbook copies. However, original manuscripts concerned, for example, with the early settlement of North America in the period before 1700 may be written in **secretary hand**. This was the script of professional scribes of the time, and it is difficult to read without specialized instruction. Unless the material has been transcribed and printed, its translation requires additional palaeographical skills. In any case, all kinds of handwritten documents made in the past tend to be difficult to decipher, especially when the investigator is trying to read a faint letterbook copy of the original. For instance, in the mid-nineteenth century, the 'long s' written much like an 'f' was frequently used in official correspondence. Words with a double 's'—'lesson', for instance—are rendered as what looks to us like 'lesfon'. Not only do spellings change as you move back in time, but so does the very construction of the English language.[3] This makes it more of a challenge to understand the world view of these earlier times. From around the 1880s, typewritten material becomes more common in government files, but important marginal annotations will be handwritten and often cryptic in meaning. These annotated comments are particularly important for the insight they can give into discussion within an organization about the issue to which the larger document relates.

A good example of some of the challenges posed by handwritten documents is the particularly hard-to-read correspondence of Captain Campbell Walker, the first conservator of forests in New Zealand in 1876–77. Because of the importance of these letters to the topic I was researching, I decided to photocopy and later transcribe them but only managed to do so after painstakingly working out, on a letter-by-letter basis, how he wrote the alphabet. Anyone contemplating the use of archive material as a source for qualitative research in human geography must be prepared to be patient and resourceful; using documentary evidence is rarely easy and generally requires a great deal of time.

The units of land area and currency may also be different from those in use today (for example, acres rather than hectares). This raises the issue of whether to convert every measurement to the current system or to give a general conversion factor and use the units of the period (generally, I prefer the latter). Some facility with the original units is useful. Appreciating that there are 640 acres to a square mile makes it possible to recognize, for example, that the apparently precise data on the forest areas in Otago Province in New Zealand in 1867 are actually only estimates to the nearest quarter square mile, or 160 acres. You may also need to understand more specialized measures, depending on your field of research. For example, throughout much of the British Empire in the nineteenth century, quantities of sawn timber are often given in superficial feet (colloquially referred to as 'superfoot')—that is, 12 inches by 12 inches by 12 inches (30 cm by 30 cm by 30 cm), but in North America the equivalent term 'board foot' was used.

If you are working through a file and time runs short, you may find yourself copying whole documents that you think could be of use because you do not have the time to read them carefully and decide whether they are. In the end, you find yourself with page after page of material that may subsequently prove to be marginal to the research. This is particularly important in that when you return to your research material, it is too easy for the photocopied document to overshadow your handwritten notes so that you again end up with the situation Harris refers to as the archive 'swallowing the researcher' (see Box 9.2).

Mistakes in interpretation can and do occur. I once mistook the numbered applications for the position of director of forests in New Zealand for the rankings of candidates. The result was an apparently nonsensical list of candidates. On closer subsequent investigation of the date stamps showing the receipt of the applications, it became clear that the numbers related only to the order in which they had been received. Retrospectively, I can draw three points from this episode. First, scrutinize documents carefully. In this case, the answer was there in the documents, but I did not see it the first time around. Second, if you are uncertain about what the documents indicate, acknowledge this, and do not make too definite a claim regarding the surviving evidence. Third, by 'learning the ropes' as an undergraduate or graduate student, you can avoid some of the more obvious pitfalls of interpretation before you have anything published.

ETHICS AND ARCHIVES

It is all too easy for archival researchers to dismiss ethical issues as something relevant only to geographers working on present-day topics using other qualitative or quantitative methodologies. Actually, archival researchers also have ethical obligations, accentuated by the fact that the individuals who created—or are the

subjects of—the records in question are in all likelihood now deceased and unable to represent themselves. Other ethical dimensions of archival research have less to do with safety, harm, and risk to the researcher or research participants and more to do with retaining the integrity of the material contained in the files and the preservation of the archives themselves. After all, those using archives should regard access to the material as a privilege. Historical records are precious and often irreplaceable. All researchers are under an obligation to look after archival material and to ensure that it is preserved in good order for any subsequent scholars.

The US National Council of Public History identifies three guidelines for using archive material.[4] We can reasonably substitute 'geographer' for 'historian' in each of these guidelines.

1. Historians work for the preservation, care and accessibility of the historical record. The unity and integrity of historical record collections are the basis of interpreting the past.
2. Historians owe to their sources accurate reportage of all information relevant to the subject at hand.
3. Historians favour free and open access to all archival collections (National Council on Public History 2003).

Another situation in which ethical issues may arise is when files that contain classified or otherwise restricted material are issued to you by mistake. While it may be tempting to capitalize on an archivist's error in issuing a file before a time embargo or other restriction has elapsed, in the longer term this is counter-productive; it is equivalent to an unsanctioned questionnaire or an interview in which the participant does not know the true purpose of the research. Such behaviour can result in tighter lending conditions being imposed on all subsequent archival users.

Public archives typically specify conditions to which users must agree to adhere when they sign in or request a reader's card. Not all primary documents are in public archives, however, and having access to such documents can present practical and ethical issues. Finer (2000) recounts an episode in which after she initially received unlimited access to the records of a prominent Italian social reformer, she learned partway through the project that new conditions governing access, the scope of the research, and its objectives were being imposed (Box 9.6).

Researching in a Private Archive	Box 9.6

For researchers using public archives, the protocols are fairly well-established and reinforced in documentation that is part of the user registration process.

On occasions, researchers will have access to private papers or records of small organizations. On the basis of a particular research project, Finer (2000) puts forward four 'negotiations' that ought to be undertaken on those occasions to ensure the smooth running of the project. They are:

1. To insist on and ideally participate in the drafting of a detailed written agreement regarding precisely what is to be attempted in the research and to what end.
2. To draft a timetable agreed to in advance by staff members who are in a position to affect access to records or to other facilities such as photocopying.
3. To reach agreement in advance on the handling of sensitive material and the extent to which and on what terms it is to be cited.
4. To reach agreement on matters of faith/ideology—that is, the extent to which it is or is not considered necessary for the researcher to be of the same persuasion as the person(s) being researched.

While Finer's project had a biographical dimension to it rather than much in the way of human geography research, her points have a general utility.

PRESENTING THE RESULTS OF ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

There is no single correct way of presenting the results of archival research. The theoretical foundation of the research project, the sorts of empirical information retrieved, and the writing style of the researcher all shape how the research project or thesis is expressed.[5] Typically, however, archival researchers will make use of direct quotations from key documents to demonstrate their case (see also Chapter 18 for a discussion of this). They will also be mindful of the actions of key actors within organizations (and sometimes the importance of the role of obscure bureaucrats as well) in shaping decisions and policy that may have had far reaching geographical significance. They also make use of case study material to illustrate points. On occasions, good use may be made of cartographic or pictorial material.

Adept researchers are often able to move easily from specific points of detail to sketch a much larger picture and to relate it to what is known about related topics. I would recommend critical perusal of recent issues of the *Journal of Historical Geography* and *Historical Geography* and recent books by recognized figures in the field (e.g., Harris 2003; Colten 2005). However, it is not just a matter of identifying key quotations but rather of building an argument. This obliges you to select ideas in a logical way from the pre-existing literature and then to use them to provide an informed discussion based on what you have found in the archives. The desirable end

point, however, is to be in command of the source material. Rather than merely reproducing a chronicle of part of what is contained in the archive, strive to make your writing a synthesis of specific detail and informed interpretation.

Conclusion

Although it has much to offer human geography in general, archival research has tended to be neglected by other than historical geographers. As a research method, historical research using archival sources:

- calls for creative thinking in identifying source materials relevant to your research problem;
- needs patience, precision, and critical reflection in collecting and evaluating material;
- requires a sense of historico-geographical imagination in interpreting source material whereby theorization does not outstrip the evidence;
- is partial and requires that you relate archival material to other contemporary sources of a textual and pictorial sort that may be held in other collections;
- asks researchers to continually negotiate between the theoretical and the empirical.

Archival work can be extremely time-consuming and, superficially at least, frustrating in that the information retrieved may offer only partial answers, particularly when you find yourself under time pressure to complete a research project. Archival work done properly takes time and patience. Rarely will the surviving archival material provide 'full' answers to the questions you pose. In the case of public archives, the surviving material typically says more about politics, economics, the concerns of elites, and men than it does about social and private spaces, women, and minority groups. It is, however, still possible to use these records to recreate something about the lives of ordinary people. But surrendering to the temptation to merely summarize the content of files, a trap into which inexperienced archival researchers can fall, is another way of being—as Harris terms it—'swallowed by the archive'.

It is all too easy in discussing archival research to create the impression that there is no room for novices when in fact more human geographers need to be encouraged to incorporate archival work into their research programs. I would simply describe archival research as somewhat akin to confidently accepting the challenge of working on a jigsaw puzzle even though you can be reasonably certain that pieces are missing and that the box cover with the picture of the completed puzzle will never be found. Good archival research can be extremely satisfying, both in learning the skills to conduct it and in the presentation of results.

Key Terms

archival research	'pencil only' rule
archives	primary sources
archivist	provenance
copperplate script	records
document	secondary literature
files	secretary hand
finding aids	series lists
modern hand	

Review questions

1. What sorts of research questions can be addressed using archival sources?
2. What are the problems of a researcher being, as Harris terms it, 'swallowed by the archive'?
3. What is meant by provenance, and why it is important to archival researchers?
4. What steps are required in assessing historical evidence?
5. What approach would you adopt to organize and store digital images from archival collections?

Useful Resources

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