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Contrapuntal archival methods

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As a post-custodial research archivist I have worked in many contexts, from projects involving major archival institutions, governments and universities through to advising and training people working at the other end of the scale, in small archives, single room collections and inadequately resourced community or religious organisations. Similarly, I have collaborated with many archivists, from senior figures in large collecting institutions and established academics to part-time, casual, unfunded and accidental archivists, and people responsible for archival collections who do not consider themselves 'archivists' at all.

Such variation often has little bearing on the significance of the records being held, particularly for individual users. As an example, when Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants[1] – the approximately 500,000 people who were in orphanages or other institutions as children in the twentieth century – are seeking information about what happened to them as children, the most significant records are the ones which hold information relevant to them. The sole surviving record featuring their mother's name might be in a Public Record Office Victoria collection or a box at the back of a cupboard in a disused church hall. In both cases, being able to find, access and understand that record is vitally important.

As archivists we cannot hope to adequately support every individual in our society in this way. With limited time, space and resources the utilitarian 'greatest good for the greatest number' approach often prevails. However, we need to ensure our profession supports varied methods and tools reflecting the different needs of people working at different scales and in different contexts. When considering archival methods – the procedures, practices and systematic approaches we use to work with records and collections – there cannot be a singular 'archival method' or single set of 'archival methods'. Instead, we should look to a shared set of principles, fundamental ideas which can be a foundation for diverse complementary methods.

Appraisal, retention and disposal practices can (and should) differ significantly. Established repositories with large 'catchment areas' cannot keep everything, but smaller organisations may be able to if they have sufficient space and resources, and should if there is an identified user need. If disposal is required, what is de-accessioned first is context dependent. To use a real example from the child welfare sector, for one person

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a single financial receipt held by an organisation was the only evidence remaining of their parent. If the record had been discarded after a pre-defined period that evidence would have been lost. In this context, perhaps 'refers to individuals by name' qualifies a record for retention, regardless of type, whereas in other contexts record function and business activity might be more significant. While all appraisal, retention and disposal decisions need to be well documented, methods and practice will vary.

Arrangement and description is already variable. It needs to allow for collection-level description to facilitate discovery and access, through to item-level description and potentially the indexing of names or other terms in individual items. There is no singular ideal; description is context dependent and should in part be demand driven. Archival technology needs to support variation, including through lightweight tools for use by organisations without information technology staff, servers or technical support. Tools should embody the principle of quality, standards-based description while being extensible enough to support variation in descriptive methods.

We also need to separate archival description and terminology from the varied methods we can use to effectively present that information to the public. While archivists need to understand concepts such as series, inventory and provenance, this should not be a requirement for search, discovery and access; and, though sustainable archival description cannot be based on a single use-case or audience, dissemination methods can be targeted to particular audiences in different contexts or at different times.

Regarding access, users often cite inconsistent access and use conditions as a source of frustration. This will not be resolved by each repository individually reading and interpreting legislation, consulting with user groups and developing organisation-specific policies. If some organisations are able to consult with community, others should draw on their findings; and organisations who have access to legal expertise should share their findings with others. Multiple complementary methods combined with cross-organisational collaboration are more likely to achieve the shared principle of consistent access and use conditions than each implementing the same method.

Finally, archivists need to consider how to better document and manage context itself. Our aim is not just to preserve and document records but to do so in a way which makes them understandable through time. Returning to the example of Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants, understanding the sometimes sparse records about a person's time in 'care' can require significant contextual information including legislation and record-keeping practices; roles and relationships of governments, churches and child welfare organisations; socio-cultural attitudes toward women, single mothers and the family; and theories of childhood development.

The Find & Connect web resource currently includes 182 'repositories' around the country holding records relevant to this audience.[2] There is no way all 182 – from the National Archives of Australia to a small community service organisation with a few boxes – could separately document and manage this complex contextual space. Context-specific archival methods should support, contribute to and benefit from the management of shared context.

None of the above requires a single, unifying set of methods; but they do require shared principles and cross-sector collaboration. On the Find & Connect Web Resource Project we talk about the idea of 'contrapuntal' history,[3] where multiple, sometimes contradictory, perspectives are allowed to co-exist without a requirement they be synthesised into a single voice or 'truth'. As a musician the concept is a familiar one (contrapuntal motion in a composition refers to melodies which move in an independent but complementary way) and as an archivist working in multiple contexts the idea is

also sound. To support a diverse archival sector we must support 'contrapuntal archival methods' which are independent enough to meet specific needs while remaining complementary through their support for common principles.

Endnotes

1. Forgotten Australians is a term used to refer to those people who were brought up in the institutional care system in Australia in the twentieth century. Former Child Migrants refers to the approximately 3300 children shipped to Australia from Britain in the post-war era. See Eris Jane Harrison, *Forgotten Australians: Supporting Survivors of Childhood Institutional Care in Australia*, third edition, Alliance for Forgotten Australians, June 2011, available at <*http://www.forgottenaustralians.org.au/PDF/MiniAfaBooklet.pdf*>, accessed 11 March 2014; and Child Migrants Trust, 'Child Migration History', available at <*http://www.childmigrants trust.com/our-work/child-migration-history*>, accessed 11 March 2014.
2. Find & Connect web resource, 'About the Find & Connect Web Resource', Find & Connect Web Resource Project for the Commonwealth of Australia, 2013, available at <*http://www. findandconnect.gov.au/about/*>, accessed 11 March 2014.
3. For example, as part of the 'Stakeholders as Subjects' panel session at Connections, the Australian Historical Association 31st Annual Conference, University of Adelaide, South Australia, 9–13 July 2012. The concept of 'contrapuntal history' is from Charles Maier, 'Overcoming the Past? Narrative and Negotiation, Remembering and Reparation: Issues at the Interface of History and the Law', in *Politics and the Past: On Repairing Historical Injustices*, John Torpey (ed.), Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2003, p. 301.