

# For Love of the Game: An Ethnographic Analysis of Archival Reference Work

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Research about archival reference is said to fall into four categories: research about use of archival material, research into the accuracy and effectiveness of reference, studies about the impact of technology on reference service, and research about the interaction between researcher and reference archivist.<sup>1</sup> This article reports on a pilot study conducted to ascertain what contribution naturalism could play in giving archivists a deeper and more nuanced understanding of archival reference. In using ethnography to study the reference process, the author sheds light on the

nature of the interaction and relationship between researcher and reference archivist. In particular, this study looks at how one reference archivist creates meaning and import in his work and what makes for a successful and effective relationship between an archivist and a researcher during the reference process.

## Introduction

This pilot study was conducted to ascertain what contribution naturalism (a research paradigm given life through the methods and assumptions of qualitative or naturalistic research) could play in giving archivists a deeper and more nuanced understanding of archival reference. As a research paradigm, naturalism has certain goals and techniques of operation. Naturalistic research:

focuses primarily on describing the characteristics of a social phenomenon. The aim is understanding the phenomenon rather than controlling it. Naturalistic researchers are interested in knowing all about each characteristic, or element, of the social phenomenon and how the elements work together to create the situation under study.<sup>2</sup>

Ethnographic fieldwork is the primary method associated with the naturalistic model of social reality. As a method for realising 'the native's point of view' ethnography was initially developed by researchers engaged in field research outside the United States.<sup>3</sup> As stated by Erickson, "ethnography' literally means 'writing about the nations;' 'graphy' from the Greek verb 'to write' and 'ethno' from the Greek noun *ethnos* ... [meaning] 'nation' or 'tribe' or 'people'". For Erickson, what makes a study ethnographic is that it 'portrays events, at least in part, from the points of view of the actors involved in the events'.<sup>4</sup> In conjunction with an understanding of the characteristics of a given social setting, naturalistic studies therefore 'focus on viewing experiences from the perspective of those involved ... The intent is to understand why people ... behave as they do'.<sup>5</sup> In conducting this study within such a framework the mode of operation was (to the extent possible) to enter an archival setting without any prescribed set of questions or any desired or predefined outcomes. The objective was to observe the social setting and, through close observation and in-depth interviews, to uncover what the

participants of the study themselves found meaningful about archival reference.

Traditionally ethnographers have worked within a single research setting; focusing on recording detailed aspects of small social groups or the operation of a particular social process.<sup>6</sup> The ethnographic research documented in this study was carried out in a university archives in the western United States, during which time the author spent between ten and fifteen hours a week, for ten weeks, on site. Data was gathered through observation (recorded using ethnographic field notes), as well as interviews with the universities on-site archival employees (primarily the archival assistant, Joe, and also his supervisor, Elaine), and a doctoral student from a university in the southern United States, Bernard, who was conducting extensive research in the archives during that time period.<sup>7</sup> In the university archives, Joe was primarily responsible for manning the reference desk, with Elaine handling the written reference requests. In this pilot study data gathering was confined to looking at the personal interaction that happened in the university archives, therefore the ethnographic fieldwork component of the study primarily involved observing Joe as he went about his work.

Ideally, ethnographic research involves long-term immersion in the setting in order to fully explore the complexities and dynamics of the social situation. However, in the qualitative research paradigm there is a tradition of using small-scale or mini applications of ethnography in order to begin to understand the 'problem space' and to identify emergent phenomenon of concern and interest. In this instance the author used key-informant interviewing, in conjunction with small scale observation, in order to aid in the process of illuminating what the participants of the study themselves found meaningful about archival reference. As 'key informants' for this study, Joe and Bernard were not only members of a defined social group with intimate knowledge of that culture but, just as importantly, they were willing and able to articulate or translate that culture for the researcher.

### **'Good questions' versus 'easy to answer questions'**

In seeking to get at what ethnographers call 'member's meanings'; to understand how Joe and Elaine understood and viewed the work that they did, a prominent theme or concept that emerged was the notion of a

'good question'. A 'good question' is a categorisation of a type of question that a person can ask when they come to do research or when they submit a reference question to the university archives. Joe first raised the notion of a 'good question' in the course of being interviewed. The notion of what constituted a 'good question' was not strictly uniform; Elaine and Joe had different criteria in this regard. This difference would appear to stem from a number of factors: educational background and training, length of time on the job, degree of interaction with the public and to some extent simply differences in personality. What was uniform, however, was that a distinction or a categorisation was made between researchers' questions.

Elaine herself never brought up the notion of 'good questions'. Despite this fact, when I asked her about this following an interview with Joe, she agreed that distinction existed. Elaine talked about the differentiation in question types in terms of 'good questions' being exciting questions. For Elaine, a 'good question' was one which allowed her to think creatively and to dig deeper, to find out certain facts, put them together and to really go into depth with the topic. A 'good question' was therefore one which was complex, one which required her to spend time with the collections ferreting out the needed information, and one which resulted in a sense of personal satisfaction or accomplishment. In Elaine's case, the notion of an exciting question was also tied up with issues of job familiarity. Elaine talked about herself in terms of being 'new' to the job and felt she needed to do a lot of the research herself in order to familiarise herself with the collections. Getting 'good questions' facilitated this engagement with the material. Therefore, when Elaine talked about exciting questions she was making that distinction for herself; what was professionally exciting and satisfying for her. The distinction for Elaine was a personal one, not a distinction she made in regard to the work of the researcher. This view is understandable due to the fact that, in carrying out her reference work, Elaine had limited personal interaction with researchers. Instead, she handled a lot of the written reference correspondence and was therefore undertaking this research herself on someone else's behalf.

In contrast to Elaine, Joe did not talk about 'good questions' in terms of issues with job familiarity. At the time that this pilot study was conducted, Joe had worked in the university archives for nine years (in contrast to Elaine's three) and was very comfortable with the collections. Joe's working knowledge of the collections was facilitated by the initial training

he received when he began working at the university archives. During his first six months on the job, Joe was asked to read all the published histories of the university. Joe also gained further knowledge about the university as he began processing university collections. Initially, Joe was doing little of the actual reference work. Instead, the focus was on grounding Joe in the basics – the university and its history. For Joe, acquiring knowledge about the collections became a process of continual learning; his knowledge of the collections being correlated to the length of time he had spent on the job.

There wasn't just one thing that made something a 'good question' for Joe (although, as we shall see, like Elaine the notion of satisfaction did come into play). For Joe, a 'good question' had a number of components. The notion of a good question was not only tied to what that meant to Joe himself (this is a topic to which I will return later), but also in terms of what a good question could mean to a researcher. Joe thought in terms of what researchers could get out of asking, or not asking, the 'good questions'. A good question for Joe was one that, first of all, required the person to carry out the research themselves at the university archives. Explicit in this notion was a belief that the person had missed an opportunity to fully use the resources of the archive if they choose not to come in in-person but instead relied solely on the staff to find information for them.

A question was also 'good' when the researcher came in and looked at the primary evidence for him or herself. This meant that the researcher not only used the published secondary sources for the definitive version of the events, but the full resources of the university archives to thoroughly investigate their topic. A good question therefore was one where the researcher used a variety of material at the university archives to look at a multitude of perspectives, and came to their own opinions and conclusions about events. In this manner, researchers were not purely consumers of information but also helped to shape its meaning and interpretation.

That's where in some cases I have a lot of problems with people who say 'well I want to know this' and they don't want to come in and look at the various angles to the event or the person. Even though they are all part of [the university], each office has its own angle on what happened and those reasons why they did specific things and if I just put them

through to the Chancellor's Office then they are only seeing what was viewed at the top. And if we put one of those as the source and the person doesn't want to come and look at all of them then we're interpreting [the university's] history as we see it instead of the researchers actually ... finding out for themselves (Interview with Joe).

Like Elaine, the depth and the challenge of the question were also seen as important to Joe. It was what made for, as Joe described, 'great topics'. In talking about good questions, Joe gave the example of a graduate student who was writing about minority women and their social life in education. This involved the person having to look through the main publications to see what they were covering and not covering and as Joe said, they were 'really having to stretch and go through all the different collections and finding that there are bits and pieces to the whole puzzle'. It is inevitable that given these criteria the people coming in with 'good questions' were generally graduate students, usually at PhD level.

The concept of a 'good question' can also be viewed in terms of what this meant for Joe himself. For Joe, it was the people with the 'good questions' that he enjoyed working with the most. Again, like Elaine, the notion of personal satisfaction came into play.<sup>8</sup> Joe also acknowledged that he spent more time with the people who ask the good questions. Naturally, they usually demanded more of him because they were using the resources of the university archives much more extensively. The 'good question' therefore had an impact on the amount of work that Joe had to do with and for a researcher.

I do spend more time with them because they have questions for me and I have questions for them whereas a lot of other people just want to be shown ... and they'll make the decision and that's pretty much all I have to worry about (Interview with Joe).

For Joe, a relationship evolved with such researchers over time. He took pride in the work that the researcher did, and got personal satisfaction from the knowledge that both he and the researcher had gained in the process. Therefore, working with 'good questions' was very intellectually satisfying for Joe.

It is beneficial for both of us ... [exploring] ideas or other places to go, to look even a little deeper, [to contribute to] a

great PhD (Interview with Joe, talking about his work with Bernard).

On a personal level Joe also appreciated, and found flattering, those researchers who were not simply asking him to find them information ('well I want to know this') but those who were asking him to use his skills and expertise to help them with their research.

During my time in the university archives there was never mention of a bad question, or a boring question, or a silly question. I eventually asked Joe the reason for this. He gave me his one line answer – because such questions are easy to answer. 'Easy to answer' questions can be considered another category of questions; a category distinct from that of 'good questions'. Although the distinction was drawn, it was not done so in a derogatory fashion. As Joe pointed out, it didn't take that much time to give a 'yes' or 'no' answer, and it could be counted in the reference statistics for the university archives. Furthermore, for Joe (and here we get to the importance of the archivist in generating good questions) contact with the university archives opened up the possibility of the person coming in to do further research. As Joe realised, this wouldn't happen if they went to their local library or looked on the Web. The very fact that they contacted the university archives was seen by Joe to be a positive thing. Any researcher who came to use the university archives was viewed as having a good attitude.<sup>9</sup>

### **The articulation of 'good questions'**

My work at the university archives supports previous research that has found that information professionals have a vital role to play in whether, and to what extent, researchers articulate their questions during the reference process.<sup>10</sup> Researchers, even those who intend to do more in-depth study, don't necessarily come in with the 'good questions' or with 'good questions' fully articulated. The notion of whether, and to what extent, the 'good question' gets articulated is tied to the job that the researcher does in explaining his or her research topic, and the job that the archivist does in drawing out, understanding, and expanding that articulation. For the archivist, refinement or clarification of the questions that the researcher comes in with appears to be of paramount importance (here I am defining refinement as the process of articulating research

concerns and linking this with possibly relevant materials). Joe provides a useful study in how archivists can participate in this refinement process.

Initially, Joe gets general information from people about what it is that they are looking for. Joe begins the process of refining questions by ascertaining how much detail a person wants. If a researcher is unsure of what they are really searching for, Joe has a particular method for working through the various resources in the university archives. He would start out in broad terms, looking at the published or printed secondary sources. Then, if the researcher wanted to research more thoroughly, Joe would focus them more toward the finding aids for the primary source collections. The people who wanted to dig deeper moved to Joe's perceived level of 'good questions'. In the process of refinement, the change and development of the question tended to direct the researcher towards specific material in the archives. As Joe demonstrates, an archivist can play a role in getting the researcher to move beyond their initial question or questions into the realm of the good question by facilitating researchers to go beyond their quest for basic information. In this instance, it is not only a question of refinement but a question of encouraging the researcher to dig deeper. The payoff for the researcher is that if they go beyond the basic information that Joe might pull for them, they can then carry out research that will better suit their needs. Again the emphasis was on facilitating this process rather than Joe always doing this research for them.

Bernard was an example of an experienced researcher who came to the archives with his research questions already more or less fully articulated. His needs were different therefore from the less experienced researcher. In Bernard's opinion, an important factor in his ability to carry out his research (and this speaks to the notion of user satisfaction) was the creation of a *joint understanding* between himself and the archivist as to the nature of his research. In many of the other archives that Bernard had worked, he felt that this joint understanding had not been created and he had left these archives feeling that he had not been able to fully exploit their holdings.

A lot of places I leave distinctly knowing ... whatever I know I need is there, I just can't find it ... and I'm not communicating the right thing to the archivist or the archivist isn't communicating the right thing to me for us to



know, both of us to know what it is I am looking for (Interview with Bernard).

Bernard felt, however, that he had achieved such an understanding with Joe. Bernard felt that they could work together to find the materials that he needed for his research. He expressed this feeling in terms of a confidence he had in Joe.

He certainly makes my job easier ... I get the confidence when I come in here that everything that I need is here somewhere and that Joe is going to help me find it and I haven't had that confidence in all archival places that I have worked (Interview with Bernard).

Part of the reason that Bernard felt he worked so well with Joe was that Joe not only knew what material Bernard was looking for but why Bernard needed the material. This further refinement of understanding saved both Joe and Bernard valuable time in their respective work as archivist and researcher.

Joe and I are invariably on the right page almost immediately in terms of needing to know what I am looking for and why. I mean you can say I am looking for information on Thailand and Joe can pull out all sorts of stuff relating to Project Thailand but it doesn't do me any good in my research because he knows what I am looking for. He knows that I am looking to make a connection between complicity of the University and Government research as it relates to foreign policy and how that might or might not engender student hostility. To pull out a Department of State flyer on how wonderful project Thailand is or the statistics of it all doesn't do my research any good and Joe knows that. So ... I don't necessarily know that those exist or anything but as an example Joe invariably pulls the stuff specifically relative to my research rather than just giving me the laundry list of everything (Interview with Bernard).

In Bernard's opinion, he and Joe were able to achieve this understanding because they talked frequently when Bernard was doing research at the university archives. Bernard also stayed in contact with Joe via email during those periods when he was not using the university archives. By

talking frequently to Bernard, Joe was able to keep up to date with what Bernard was working on and actively follow Bernard's research.<sup>11</sup>

We speak frequently during the day while I'm here but two years ago was when I first came here and ... since then ... we have emailed back and forth and then when I came out here again ... he asked me, 'what exactly are you working on, how have you refined this?' So I explained it to him some more ... (Interview with Bernard).

### Reciprocity of reference

In my observations at the university archives I was able to see Joe's interactions with Bernard firsthand. While working at the university archives, Bernard frequently questioned Joe about the collections that he was working with. 'One last question ... Well probably not [both laugh]' (Bernard to Joe).

Bernard also talked to Joe regarding what he had found while doing research in the collections. What was striking therefore was the *reciprocity*; the constant exchange of information back and forth between the two as both learned from each other.<sup>12</sup> Joe provided answers to Bernard's questions about collections. Bernard provided Joe with information about what he had found in those collections. The learning was reciprocal. For Bernard, such an interaction allowed him to update Joe about his research and therefore prompted Joe to help him in further searches for material. For Joe, such an interaction not only facilitated his job in helping Bernard find material but it was also a way to mine information about the collections. Bernard talked about Joe almost doing the research with him.

So if I find something, I'll snicker out loud and he'll ask what I have discovered. So I'm sharing with him as I'm finding the stuff. So in some respects he's almost doing the research with me. So he's keeping [abreast] ... with what I have discovered and where I am going with it all (Interview with Bernard).

I interrupt him after he says 'yes' or ... other tones where he has found something good and so I go 'okay what is it now?' and he tells me and I look at it and if its something that I

know I can use I've been writing it on a piece of paper  
(Interview with Joe).

For Joe, in theory if not in practice, there was, however, a level of assistance in the research process beyond which he would rather not go. Joe was cognisant of the role that he played in the research process and how that affected his work, the work of the university archives, and the work of the researcher. On a very basic level Joe disliked making decisions about the relevancy of information (what Joe calls 'doing research') for other people.

And really, I hate to say, I don't really like doing research for other people. I don't mind showing them how to find the information but when it comes, when they ask 'well where is it exactly' and 'what is it exactly' that's kind of where I go well let's page these boxes so you can take a look at them (Interview with Joe).

There are a number of reasons for this. On a practical level not having to do the research freed Joe up to do other work for the university archives and therefore to manage his own work commitments better. 'I try and get them to do the research themselves ... that way I can actually process more and do other projects' (Interview with Joe).

Joe also felt that researchers would learn more about the collections by carrying out their own research. For Joe, the advantage of this was that it forged connections with the university archives. Joe saw this as being particularly important in terms of drawing the attention of people who work on campus (whether administrators, staff or faculty) to the resources available in the university archives. Having university staff or faculty carry out research on the materials themselves was also seen as a way to prompt these people to transfer more recent material from their own departments to the university archives.

I try and get them to do the research themselves that way they get more familiar with the collection ... I guess that way they have more of a connection and will remember that we do have materials here and that way they can also think about transferring the more recent materials that are inactive over as well (Interview with Joe).

Joe encouraged people to do their own research by pointing out the benefits that will accrue to them in doing so. The emphasis was on

allowing people to see that in doing the research themselves they could be sure that they have found the material best suited to their project.

On another level, Joe was also cognisant of the role that he played in helping researchers find material and the impact that this had on the research process. Joe's feelings about this hark back to a comment that he made in regard to a specific aspect of 'good questions'. That is, the notion that a good question is one where the researchers themselves use a variety of material at the university archives to look at a multitude of perspectives and to come to their own opinions and conclusions about events. For Joe an important theme is that of his impartiality in finding sources for researchers.

Joe saw his job as ideally being to present information and not to interpret or select material. For Joe being impartial meant that he did his best not to control or direct the researchers to the extent that he ended up making the value judgment of whether the material was relevant or not. The goal was for the researcher themselves to make that value judgment based on knowledge of that and other sources.

In other words ... even though that you know a source is not exactly right on, to not totally turn them off of that source but ... to say make sure to look at it and double check it with other sources and not just accept one source over another (Interview with Joe).

Joe felt this way for a number of reasons. First of all, as stated previously, Joe would rather that researchers do the work themselves and in doing so develop their own skills in analyzing and interpreting material. Second of all, Joe was aware of the fact that he personally was not the keeper of all knowledge about the collections at the university archives. He or another researcher may have yet to discover all the details about a collection. Joe also realised that ultimately it was all 'historical interpretation'; history was not about one truth but about the differing interpretations and analyses of events based on historical perspectives in and over time.

You really should then let the researcher decide what sources, what information ... they find to be of use instead of me or another reference person saying 'you don't want to use that at all, here's the file and documents that really are the ones that you should concentrate on' ... because they

might find evidence to the contrary you know. Hopefully that when they get into it they'll be able to find the facts, figures, dates or whatever they are looking for. And what other people have told me or what I have seen might be off as well. And of course it's all historical interpretation too (Interview with Joe).

A perhaps unanticipated finding following ten weeks of observation and interviews at the university archives was the importance of the physical setting and the impact that this had on the reference and research process. The setup of the university archives (in terms of space and physical facilities) was not what is considered 'ideal' for an archival repository. The lack of space in the university archives meant that Joe had to carry out much of his work in the same room, and in very close proximity to the researchers. This is in contrast to a more idealised model of an archival repository in which the researcher works in a separate reading room under supervision. At times, the physical space and layout of the university archives made for a cramped and somewhat noisy environment. In the case of the university archives, however, it can actually be argued that the lack of separation between the archivist and the researcher had marked benefits for both. Bernard talked about the university archives in terms of it being a 'very personal physical space'. By this he meant that he carried out his work literally four feet away from where Joe worked. In Bernard's mind, this freed him from the usual courtesy regulations of other repositories. For example, he was free to engage Joe in conversation and vice versa. The unique and rewarding feature of the university archives for Bernard was that 'the materials are coming into this room and I am reading it right where I am getting it ... right where the archivist is working' (Interview with Bernard).

The very personal physical space allowed Bernard to maintain contact with Joe when he was in the process of going through the collections and allowed for that exchange of information that characterised their research relationship. This pilot study suggests that the research process and the ability of the researcher to carry out his or her work would seem to be impacted by the level of rules and regulations in the archival setting and how these rules are enforced.<sup>13</sup> Bernard appreciated the more relaxed atmosphere in the university archives, where rules and regulations were kept to a minimum. He compared this experience to the intimidating

working conditions in another archival repository where he had carried out research.

They have a special reading room. There is somebody sitting in an elevated like juror's box, for lack of a better phrase. It can be sort of intimidating... I don't think they allow you to take the document up off the table so I mean there's... I find myself... more worried about violating some regulation than actually doing my research... So the physical space can be more intimidating (Interview with Bernard).

## Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was not to arrive at the definitive account of the reference process. This study chose instead to delve into what the participants of the study themselves found meaningful about archival reference. Although no claims of generalisability can be made based on the very small scale nature of this research, it is fair to say that this study has shed light on how one reference archivist created meaning and import in his work. In doing so, some of the factors that make for a successful and effective relationship between an archivist and a researcher during the reference process have been uncovered.<sup>14</sup> These findings are important because they add to a nascent discussion in the archival literature about what makes for good reference.

Delving into the meaning behind the 'good question' helps in part to understand what gave Joe meaning and satisfaction in carrying out his work. When Joe was asked what makes for a good reference archivist he listed three things: knowledge of the collections, ability to get along with people, and the ability to help people while at the same time being impartial in finding sources for them. Bernard viewed Joe as being a good reference archivist because he understood that his job was to disseminate information about the organisation that he worked for; in doing so, placing the focus not on himself and his knowledge, but on the collections and what the researchers could get from them.

He's genuinely interested in helping them find what they are looking for... because he realises that his job is to... help disseminate information... and he certainly has no ego involvement in terms of 'you know this is my space, you will come in and pay obeisance to me and in my lair' as it

were and I've seen archivists behave that way before. He certainly doesn't have any ... pretensions about ... the collections or ... his place in them ... and ... he seeks to get information from people, what it is they are looking for ... 'do you have any dates, do you have any names', anything that makes his job easier. At the same time he's not a public information officer, he's not supposed to be able to pull out the singular piece of paper that has everything that you need on it. He can tell you where to look for it. This is after all an archives not a reference desk ... so ... I think he is cognisant of the fact that people should come in here and expect to do a little of it themselves (Interview with Bernard).

It was apparent that Joe was seen as being exceptionally good at reference. According to his supervisor, Elaine, what Joe did was more than just a job for him; she talked about his love for his work. Elaine seemed to feel that Joe had something, some knowledge or ability (she called it an 'understanding') that helped him in his job. In this context, Barnett's idea that good reference on the part of the archivist 'takes both nature and nurture' seems to have merit. Barnett says that 'good reference comes not just from the head, but also from the heart. It takes a certain kind of temperament or personality, in addition to a knowledgeable background, to be most effective in the role of providing answers to those who have questions'.<sup>15</sup>

In trying to understand where Joe made a contribution to the job of reference, there are certain qualities that seem to provide the clues. These are distinct qualities that emerge from the ethnography, qualities that Joe displayed even if he did not attribute them directly to himself.<sup>16</sup> Joe viewed the materials that he worked with, not as anonymous objects but as groups of material that he had working knowledge of. When Elaine pointed out that Joe was very good at getting people to refine their questions because he knew a lot about the collections, this fact is important because it speaks to the idea (mentioned above) of the 'knowledgeable background' or what needs to be learned on the job. Along with his initial training, the degree of familiarity that Joe had with the university archives holdings can be attributed to the nature and the degree of interaction that he had with many of the researchers. As stated earlier, Joe often developed a reciprocal type of relationship with researchers who came in to use the university archives. He not only helped researchers

find material that they needed but he then subsequently made a point of asking them about what they have found. Joe admitted that such interaction with researchers took a little bit more of his time. However, he believed that it was worthwhile for him to do this because of the subsequent benefits that it brought – he could pass on what he had learned to others.<sup>17</sup> Joe therefore created use values from the material. Joe wanted to learn from other people and got satisfaction from the knowledge that he and others found from working with the collections. In forging joint understandings around the material and facilitating reciprocal learning he was able to gain the confidence of the researcher. He was also anxious that researchers were not purely consumers of information but that they helped to shape its meaning and interpretation.

In addition, Joe brought a certain perspective to questions of ownership and control of the material. In the past, archivists have been accused of being more concerned about getting physical and intellectual control over the records in their possession, rather than whether those records were subsequently used. Joe brought the use of collections to the forefront. Moreover, in doing so he didn't take a territorial stance toward either the collections or how researchers used the archival space in which both he and researchers operated. Joe's basic philosophy of reference was simple; 'if nobody uses the collections then why have them'.

From a research perspective, this pilot study demonstrates the need for further study and analysis of aspects of archival reference; including, in this instance, the nature of job satisfaction and the nature of the interaction and relationship between researcher and reference archivist.<sup>18</sup> Using observation and in-depth interviews, this pilot study has brought to light interesting concepts that form around the archivist/researcher relationship; including the notion of 'good questions', 'reciprocity', and 'confidence'. This study showed that a good question was defined by its content or research parameters, and by the practical work implications for Joe. The significance of 'good questions' was also that Joe was flattered by them and that these questions required him to more fully use his skills and expertise. However, it can be argued that what is fundamentally important about the concept of 'good questions' is that they allowed Joe to find personal meaning and import in what he did and what he knew.

The concepts of reciprocity and confidence are factors that help establish a successful and effective relationship between an archivist and



researcher during the reference process. These concepts are important because they form the basis for, or the beginning of, a theory that speaks to the interactional aspects of archival reference. Such concepts are essentially the building blocks of theory; concepts being tied together through statements or propositions in order for a theory to emerge. However, because of the preliminary nature of this research study there is a considerable amount of work to do before a personal or interactional theory of archival reference can emerge using this data. The concepts identified in this study need additional investigation to clarify and differentiate their dimensions. Further study is already ongoing to see whether, and to what extent, these concepts can be linked to, or have an equivalency in, established sociological ideas that have been defined around the notions of trust and reciprocity. Further study will also be required to see whether these findings are idiosyncratic or specific to the circumstances of this pilot study or whether, in fact, similar results will be found in other archival reference settings.<sup>19</sup> Differences or variables that could be looked at include how these concepts apply in larger archival institutions, how these concepts apply with the interaction of archivists with less experienced researchers, or how these concepts apply in instances where archivists may not staff the reading room.<sup>20</sup>

## Endnotes

1 Richard J Cox, 'Researching Archival Reference as an Information Function: Observations on Needs and Opportunities', *Reference Quarterly* vol. 31, Spring 1992, pp. 387-97. Quoted in Mary Jo Pugh, *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts*, Society of American Archivists, Chicago, 2005, p. 282.

2 Constance Ann Mellon, *Naturalistic Inquiry for Library Science*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1990, p. 5.

3 Helen B Schwartzman, *Ethnography in Organizations*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, 1993, p. 1.

4 Frederick Erickson, 'What Makes School Ethnography 'Ethnographic?'' *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 15, 1984, pp. 51-2.

5 Constance Ann Mellon, *Naturalistic Inquiry for Library Science*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1990, p. 3.

6 Margaret D. LeCompte and Judith Preissle, *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research*, Academic Press, San Diego, 1993, p. 3.

7 Pseudonyms are used for all participants in this study.

8 While he jokingly admitted that he was perhaps elitist in this respect, there was no evidence that any sense of elitism was carried over into the level of service that he offered to researchers. Indeed, Bernard pointed this out when talking about his experience of working with Joe.

'... I've seen him interact with other researchers who have come in since I've been here and he treats them just as cordial and friendly and knowledgeable as he treats me' (Interview with Bernard).

9 Such an attitude is healthy in a work environment in which good questions are obviously far fewer in number.

10 See for example Linda Long's literature review on question negotiation theory. Linda J Long, 'Question Negotiation in the Archival Setting: the Use of Interpersonal Communication Techniques in the Reference Interview', *American Archivist*, no. 52, Winter 1989, pp. 40-51.

11 A relationship between archivist and researcher that extends beyond the help received in the archives itself is also documented by Duff and Johnson in their study of the information seeking behavior of historians. Duff and Johnson mention such instances including one in which an archivist 'continued to monitor the collections and inform [the historian] of relevant sources after he had returned home'. Wendy M Duff and Catherine A Johnson, 'Accidentally Found on Purpose: Information-Seeking Behavior of Historians in Archives', *Library Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 4, October 2002, p. 484.

12 This type of interaction between archivist and researcher was also noted in Barbara Orbach's study of historian's perceptions of research and repositories. She states that 'the back-and-forth of an informal conversation can often produce a fuller picture of a researcher's needs than can be elicited in a formal reference interview'. Barbara C Orbach, 'The View from the Researcher's Desk: Historians' Perceptions of Research and Repositories', *American Archivist*, vol. 54, no. 1, Winter 1991, p. 43.

13 In my experience expressing such an opinion can be contentious within the archival profession. However, similar findings have been reported in the literature. See for example Brauer's comments about the 'one box rule' and the impact this had on his ability to carry out research. Carl M Brauer, 'Researcher Evaluation of Reference Services', *American Archivist*, vol. 43, no. 1, Winter 1980, p. 78.

14 In presenting the results of ethnographic research to an archival audience it is not uncommon for the findings to be called into question. This may be due to the fact that archivists draw from the assumptions and traditions of the more familiar quantitative paradigm in order to evaluate the results of all types of studies. In a positivistic quantitative research paradigm, reliability and validity is conceptualised in terms of accuracy of measurement and repeatability or replicability of findings. The findings of ethnographic studies

should however be judged based on the manner in which the data is gathered, analyzed, and presented within the framework and meaning of a different, and in some sense oppositional, research paradigm. In a qualitative research paradigm, validity and reliability should be measured in terms of the credibility, transferability, and quality of the data.

15 LR Barnett, 'Sitting in the Hot Seat: Some Thoughts from the Reference Chair', in Laura B Cohen (ed), *Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts*, The Haworth Press Inc, New York, 1997, p. 47.

16 Joe never spoke about himself in these terms. In fact he labelled himself on more than one occasion as a 'para-professional'. The para-professional comment referred to his lack of a Masters degree in Library and Information Science, a qualification which would have allowed him to move beyond the archival assistant scale at his workplace. The para-professional comments probably also allude to the fact that, on occasions, Joe didn't appear to take himself too seriously. Part of him, as he said, was just 'glad to be employed'. He did speak however of the university archives as being his 'niche' and what he really liked doing. While Joe said he enjoyed both reference and processing, he expressed a preference for reference on account of what he called the 'people contact'.

17 Asking researchers for information could also have practical benefits for Joe in other aspects of his work. Bernard was an example in point. He had pointed out items to Joe that he had come across in collections that might be good for an exhibit. This idea of 'reciprocity', where both archivist and researcher benefit from the reference relationship, has also been noted by Duff and Johnson. Catherine A Johnson and Wendy M Duff, 'Chatting Up the Archivist: Social Capital and the Archival Researcher', *American Archivist*, vol. 68, Spring/Summer 2005, p. 124-5.

18 In the past, the significance, appropriate role, and issues of quality and quantity of research literature have been a contentious issue within particular information professions. According to Jesse Shera, Beals once classified literature in the library field as belonging to either the category of 'good tidings', 'testimony', or 'research'; adding that there was little of the last. Losee and Worley echoed this sentiment with their assertion that, 'there is a tendency among information professionals to write and publish in the "How I done it good" genre'. Schlachter characterised Library and Information Science research as 'fragmented, noncumulative, generally weak, and relentlessly oriented to immediate practice'. Jesse H Shera, 'Darwin, Bacon, and Research in Librarianship', *Library Trends*, vol. 13, July 1964, p. 145. Quoted in Ronald R Powell and Lynn Silipigni Connaway, *Basic Research Methods for Librarians*, Libraries Unlimited, Westport, 2004, p. 3. Robert M Losee, Jr and Karen A Whorley, *Research and Evaluation for Information Professionals*, Academic Press, San Diego, 1993, p. ix. Quoted in Powell and Connaway, p. 3. Gail

Schlachter, 'Research: One Step at a Time', *Reference Quarterly*, vol. 28, Spring 1989, pp. 293-4. Quoted in Peter Herson, 'The Elusive Nature of Research in LIS', in Charles R McClure and Peter Herson (eds.), *Library and Information Science Research: Perspectives and Strategies for Improvement*, Ablex Publishing Corporation, Norwood, New Jersey, 1991, p. 6. It takes little stretch of the imagination to see that these assertions could equally be applied to the archival profession. A little more than a decade ago, Richard Cox (writing in his capacity as editor of the *American Archivist*) stated that there was 'virtually no substantial research going on in archival science'. Using America's main archival journal as a lens through which to examine the state of archival research, his findings substantiated that claim. Archival research, at least in the decades of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, was shown to be meager in terms of frequency, quantity, topics, and sophistication of research methodology. Janice Ruth found a similar situation, in terms of lack of writing about archival reference and the skills archivists need to do the job of reference, in the 1980s. As the bibliographic essay in Mary Jo Pugh's new update to the SAA archival fundamentals series on reference shows, despite these shortcomings, there are signs that in the archival arena (as in the field of Library and Information Science) the quality and the quantity of our research is showing signs of improvement. Richard J Cox, 'An Analysis of Archival Research, 1970-92, and the Role and Function of the *American Archivist*', *American Archivist*, vol. 57, Spring 1994, p. 279. Janice E Ruth, 'Educating the Reference Archivist', *American Archivist*, vol. 51, no. 3, Summer 1988, p. 266.

19 The concept of reciprocity appears to have some traction as it also features in the work of Johnson and Duff. Their work on reciprocity uncovered what historians believed archivists gained from the reference relationship. While there is some common ground between the study presented here and Johnson and Duff's research, there are differences in the approaches taken to studying the relationship between archivists and researcher. In the Johnson and Duff study, ideas about social network analysis and social capital are used as a framework to examine the strength of relationships between individuals and to look at the resources that people have access to through their relationships. In my study, naturalism is used as a framework to shed light not necessarily on the strength of relationships between individuals but on what makes that relationship effective. Johnson and Duff, 'Chatting Up the Archivist', pp. 113-29.

20 In a qualitative research framework no attempt would be made to control for these variables to establish cause and effect, but instead a rich assortment of variables would be sought out and studied directly.