An Ethic of Care: Interrogating the Need for Care in the Archives

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Abstract:

Using a mixture of personal experience and frameworks presented by Caswell and Cifor (2016), this essay explores the tangible ways that archival spaces can and should account for the affective responses of their user groups. Drawing on a case study at Algoma University, care work is demonstrated to be an imperative element for just, engaged, and enriched archival service.

Keywords:

Ethics, Care, Residential School, Archives

DOI:10.33137/ijournal.v6i2.36454

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In the winter of 2018, I took part in a project as part of an upper year undergraduate religious studies course that aimed to address how religious education had occurred within Canadian residential schools—more specifically, how were religious texts or materials utilized in the violent and colonial spaces of residential school classrooms? To answer this question, my classmates and I paid a visit to the United Church Archives in Toronto to see if we could find primary source materials such as lesson plans, students’ work, or accounts that pertained to specific biblical passages. Though that trip was largely unsuccessful in terms of finding answers to that set of questions, it did raise an entirely different set of questions for me, which have come up since that trip several times. What I observed about being in the physical space of this archive and all the procedures that accompanied this was that it was largely unfeeling, semi-sterile, and not well set up for dealing with reactions to materials that were laden with horrific trauma, racism, and the legacy of Canadian colonialism. Given these conditions, I wondered, if an archive user has a strong emotional reaction to materials they are viewing, what supports are present or lacking? How does the space or the staff make them feel? This is especially relevant if the material has deep and lasting impacts on the person viewing the documents, which is no doubt the case for users who are survivors of residential school or any number of emotionally difficult historical records that archives hold. As a result, this analysis will endeavour to examine and interrogate recent innovations in ethics of care within the archival world. This observation and line of questioning is indebted to Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor for their work on radical empathy and building an ethic of care for archivists, their record keeping practices, users, and user communities (2016). Cifor and Caswell (among others) have encouraged the archival world to cultivate a professional practice that asks archivists to care not just for their visitors as users of an archive, but as whole people. It asserts that archivists must rise above the façade of neutrality, not only in their descriptions of documents, but also in their interactions with users and communities (Caswell & Cifor, 2016). As such, this analysis will aim to do three things: establish what an ethic of care is, why it is imperative to doing archival work justly, and examine a case study of employing that ethic of care. The central goal of this analysis is to assert and affirm that as archival professionals move forward in decolonizing, interrogating, and attempting to make this field more accessible and hospitable for a wider range of people, it must pay careful attention to users as emotional beings and attend to the reactions and feelings they bring to their visits to the archive.

At the most basic level, what does it mean to care? According to Engster (2005), who examines care from a moral and political philosophy standpoint, “caring means endeavoring to support lives free from malnutrition, illness, exhaustion, pain, or physical danger. It means fos-

tering the greater or lesser basic capabilities of individuals so that they can function as much as possible in society” (p. 53). While archivists may not have the ability to influence the basic needs and fulfillment of their users, there are areas that they can affect—specifically in the area of pain. It is true that archivists cannot control the emotional reactions of their users, but they can attempt to have respectful, useful, and radically empathetic responses to the pain they witness. Engster asserts that “a caring person notices when another is in need and responds appropriately. Most generally, without attentiveness, our caring will be limited or ineffective because we will fail to notice when others are in need or will respond in partial or inappropriate ways” (Tronto 1993, as cited in Engster, 2005). While Engster is interested in the question of whether people should have an “independent moral duty to care for others” separate from “feelings of affection, love or empathy” (p. 58), this analysis is interested in the question: do archivists have a professional duty to care for their users? To answer this question, the meaning of ‘an ethic of care’ must be examined.

What then, is an ethic of care within the archival world? In essence, this is a prioritization of the user needs not simply on the logistical, schematic level, but on a deeply emotional one. According to Marika Cifor’s analysis of scholar Sarah Ahmed, ““in order to witness [pain], archivists and scholars must learn to understand that the “past lives in the very wounds that remain open in the present”” (Ahmed 2004, as cited in Cifor, 2016). Given this understanding of how the past manifests itself within archival material, “subjects need to be allowed to have a say about the records that involve them, whether that be related to the way they are described, how they are used or if they should even exist” (Watt, 2017, p. 196). This version of an ethic of care is focused not only on the logistics of archival proceedings and record keeping, but also on the actual visitation and use of the archives by the user. How can this profession interrogate and improve the user process? How can archivists make users more comfortable both physically and emotionally? Are archives a safe space? Are they conducive to processing an emotional reaction, be that traumatic or joyous? More often than not, it seems that in both procedure and physical structure, archives trend toward an all-encompassing ‘neutrality’—in other words, so often they are places that do not invite commiseration, reaction, or comfort.

While ethical codes and standards are attached to governing institutions and bodies within the archival world, are they sufficient principles to guide archivist, records managers, and information professionals through the tumultuous, complex, and emotionally involved event of bearing witness to emotional reactions and needs? David A. Wallace (2010) notes that often “codes serve as a starting point and not as a terminus for evaluating ethical challenges” (p. 177). But what if these codes could function as a more robust prompt for reflection and cultivation of the radical

empathy suggested by Caswell, Cifor, and others? Wallace (2010) goes on to assert that codes can be extremely limiting given that “ethical meaning cannot be reduced to a solitary, self-sufficient, unambiguous, authoritative statement that pre-judges action and leaves no place for consideration of multiple motivations or outcomes or points of view” (Wallace, p. 178). When orienting archives to a care ethic, this means that broad strokes approaches to ethical professionalism will never be sufficient on their own, rather they serve as a baseline on which an archivist must expand and apply notions of radical empathy, and ever evolving sensitivity in order to take responsibility for the impact of the records they keep and the users they serve.

A major motivation for cultivating and employing an ethic of care within the archival profession is to attempt to rectify the prevalent public attitudes and perceptions of the archives as a place that is not welcoming to their needs or questions. The archives are also considered to be an institution that upholds dominant voices over the marginalized or the silenced and that is only interested in structuring archival records in a way that is inaccessible for the lay user. Simply put, what measures are in place to accommodate the kind of care that has been discussed thus far? If archivists are not able to easily answer questions about measures of care, this points to a deficit in the kind of service they provide that needs to be addressed. In Gina Watts’ (2017) article “Applying Radical Empathy to Women’s March Documentation Efforts: A Reflection Exercise” she uses the framework laid out by Caswell and Cifor to examine how this ethic of care can be applied to a particular archival setting. She notes,

if a user in the archive is affected by, for example, offensive language or violent images in a collection, how can archivists care for them? Before sensitive collections are public, there should be an assessment of what training is needed to handle any emotional responses from user (p.197).

This is a concrete example of a situation archivists are doubtlessly encountering. One need only to look at the myriad of archives and collections that are dedicated to preserving histories of struggle (e.g., National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, Holocaust Archive at the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, Documenting Ferguson) to know that archivists can be privy to the grief, reconciliation, and trauma that is involved when a user uncovers a document that touches their history or story. Watts (2017) notes that the different levels of power and privilege between creators, subjects, users and communities reveal whose needs are served by different archival decisions. Radical empathy also allows an archivist to learn from these relationships and change the way they interact with records accordingly, such that decisions about the collection can be reassessed if need be (p.195).

It is this kind of holistic thinking about how an ethic of care can and should permeate into all aspects of archival work. Watts' analysis also points to why an ethic of care is needed in the first place: not only does this approach move toward a more just and equitable experience for the user, it also asks archivists to make connections and observations about their records that will serve to create an even deeper understanding of those materials.

If the archival world takes seriously the suggestion of Caswell and Cifor, Watts, Wallace and scholar/practitioners who follow in their footsteps, what then does it look like to employ an ethic of care? At its core, to engage in this ethic is to acknowledge that “the pain of others in the archives is not simply theirs; it has something to do with us as archivists, scholars, users, and social justice advocates. There is an ethics of responding to pain that Ahmed argues ‘involves being open to being affected by that which one cannot know or feel’” (Ahmed 2004, as cited in Cifor, 2016, p. 21). Though, some archives have taken these critiques and frameworks and applied them to their professional practice. One such example is the work being done by the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre (SRSC), in collaboration with Algoma University. The work of this archival project is borne out of a desire to see the history of residential schools from the survivor perspective. Recognizing the importance of involving people whom the historical documents represent has contributed to the SRSC mandate, which actively engages residential school survivors, families, and communities in collection development, description, and educational programming (McCracken, 2015, p. 182). This grassroots initiative implemented community consultation and involvement at each step to ensure that the community felt their experiences were being respected and preserved in a way that suited their wants and needs (McCracken, p. 184). In addition to this community input during the early years, “a heritage committee has been established to provide guidance on Indigenous best practices, outreach programming, and policy development,” (McCracken, p.185) as well as participation in identifying and naming subjects within photos of residential school children by the surrounding survivors and their families. An ethic of care is also employed in the archivists' interactions and supports for users. During professional correspondence I had this summer with Krista McCracken, SRCS' archives supervisor, they explained some of the interpersonal steps taken to ensure a safe environment for their users, who are very often residential school survivors or who have direct contact with someone who is a survivor. Some of these steps include having training for archivists and staff in how to notice or intervene if someone is experiencing emotional distress, as well as knowing the appropriate supports to contact if the situation calls for that kind of intervention (McCracken, professional correspondence, July 2020). Similarly, the archival space at SRCS is set up to accommodate groups of people looking

at materials together in a way that encourages comradery and comfort, rather than the more typical parameters of a reading room, which are often associated with silence and independent work (McCracken, professional correspondence, July 2020). In short, the staff at SRCS are inviting and preparing for their users to have a range of emotional experiences, which they are not avoiding or discouraging with restrictive policies or inattentive service. This iteration of an ethic of care addresses the record keeping practices, user collaboration and consultation at every level with compassionate and empathic service.

To return to David A. Wallace's (2010) perspective, it is imperative that the archival profession "move from a universalizing ethics toward one that embraces its complexity, contradiction, and reveals hidden values and assumptions" (p.187); an ethic of care is one that does just this. As the archival world grapples with its own legacy and history in an effort to correct its ethical lacunae, archivists must "recognize that the archive is as much about the current and future health of society as it is about understanding the past" (p.187). As such, it is in the best interest for archival professionals and users to take seriously the need for an ethic of care and to become imaginative and curious about what this can look like in practice. The Shingwauk Residential School Centre is one example of how the essence of care can be applied in a variety of ways, though this model cannot and will not fit every institution or every archivist. Nevertheless, critical assessment and self-reflection on the relevance of professional ethical codes, care work, and the need for a radically empathetic practice are necessary if archives are to endeavour to serve communities in a just and meaningful way.

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