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## THE EFFECTS OF EMOTIONS ON CERTAIN SEGMENTS OF WORK IN ARCHIVES

### Abstract

**Purpose:** *The aim of this analysis was to gain a comprehensive understanding of discussions on emotions in archives and their positioning within different segments of archival practice.*

**Methodology:** *A qualitative approach involving a review of existing literature on the theme of emotions in archives was used. The collected articles were then categorized into various segments of archival work: archival pedagogy, archival exhibitions, the work of archivists, the impact on researchers and archive users, and philosophical-theoretical considerations.*

**Results:** *The topic is relatively young, with the first conference on emotions in archives taking place only in 2014 in Los Angeles. Nonetheless, further searches for articles will be necessary, as new publications continue to emerge.*

**Conclusions/findings:** *Based on the collected articles, it can be inferred that emotions play a significant role in motivating the exploration of new content, which is particularly evident in the fields of archival pedagogy and archival exhibitions. Emotions also influence how archivists and historians perceive archival documents. This opens opportunities for further research that could deepen existing knowledge or explore new segments of archival work where the impact of emotions is apparent.*

**Keywords:** *archives, emotions, affects, archivists.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In our society, emotions are often understood as opposed to rationality, as a negative counterpoint to rationality and reason, which are considered essential for the success of democratic culture. According to conventional interpretative patterns, if emotions were not strictly controlled but mobilized, they would undermine rational thinking, negate reason, foster destructive behaviour, and pose a threat to democratic development. This dichotomy between emotions and rationality has characterized Western philosophy since the 17th century and appears to continue influencing our thinking today (Frevert & Schmidt, 2011, 18). Some historians and archivists apparently also don't recognize the influence of their own emotions in their work. They often strive to avoid eliciting emotional reactions when presenting historical facts, arguing that emotions interfere with objectivity and have no place in science (e.g. Rosenwein, 2002; Vodopivec, 2004; Verginella, 2006; Frevert & Schmidt, 2011, 5–7; Jeraj, 2018; Baier, 2023, 42). Nevertheless, archivists' emotions affect their selection, decisions, and descriptions (Rupčić, 2022).

## 2. METHODS AND PURPOSE

For this article, a qualitative approach involving a review of existing literature on the theme of emotions in archives was employed. Primary sources were sought in accessible online collections and databases<sup>2</sup>, selecting relevant articles based on keywords such as “archives,” “emotions,” and “affects.” Included are also contributions from a conference on the theme of emotions in archives, which was held online on October 7, 2022 and are available as video recordings on the University of Malta's website<sup>3</sup>. Two contributions from the conference “Gespeicherte Gefühle - Affekte im Archiv,” held on October 13 and 14, 2022, in Krems (Austria), and some additional ones were accessed indirectly during further exploration of the topic.

The collected articles were then categorized into various segments of archival work:

- archival pedagogy,
- archival exhibitions,
- the work of archivists,

2 Such as <https://www.researchgate.net/>; <https://www.jstor.org/>; <https://www.academia.edu/>; [www.webofscience.com](http://www.webofscience.com); <https://scholar.google.com/>; <https://journals.sagepub.com/>; <https://www.sciencedirect.com/>.

3 <https://www.um.edu.mt/maks/las/ourresearch/projectsandinitiatives/archivesemotionsconference/>.

- the impact on researchers and archive users,
- and philosophical-theoretical considerations.

Each segment was analysed separately, with a brief description of each article outlining the issues it addresses and the specific segments of archival work it explores in detail. The aim of this analysis was to gain a comprehensive understanding of discussions on emotions in archives and their positioning within different segments of archival practice.

### **3. RESULTS**

#### **3.1. THE INFLUENCE OF EMOTIONS IN ARCHIVAL EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES**

Jane Greer is a professor of Humanities and Sociology at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. In her article (Greer, 2022), she provides an in-depth analysis of the seminar papers of two of her students. One student, who comes from a Christian background, was drawn to the life story of an early 20th century missionary, which she explored using archival documents. Greer notes the student's surprise upon discovering that more relevant documents related to the missionary's work were found in the archival collection of the missionary's husband, rather than in the sparse documents within the collection named after the missionary herself. The other student, who identifies as a member of the LGBT community, sought to study a lesbian activist and artist from the 1980s and 1990s. However, after delving into the documents, she was somewhat disappointed to find that the person she chose was more of a comedian than a true activist and artist. Both students, therefore, had emotional reactions to the organization of the archives. The first felt it was unjust that significant works of the missionary were stored under her husband's collection, while the second felt somewhat cheated by the classification of her subject among artists and activists.

Marino (2018) in his article notes that archival pedagogy heavily relies on the cognitive impact of instructions, often neglecting the emotional aspect. He describes an experiment with students divided into two groups: one group was taught in a traditional lecture-based manner on the use of archival aids, while the other group was given brief instructions and left to explore on their own. It was

found that the latter group had more confidence in their future ability to search archival materials, were more enthusiastic about their work, discussed their chosen topics with greater confidence, and were generally more satisfied with their archival findings.

Experiences with visits by school groups and other audiences to the archive indicate that students are most attracted to documents (e.g., old postcards, building plans, school records) that they recognize from their own environment, allowing them to compare the present with the past. It appears that the age of the visitors does not play a significant role, as all visitors, regardless of age, are most delighted by images of familiar places, such as their school, village, or neighbourhood (Horvat, 2017, 103).

In the field of education, it is also acknowledged that affect is crucial to understanding the educational experiences of both students and teachers; however, it has been overlooked for far too long. Just as the concept of motivation has become deeply embedded in our understanding of education over the past decades, affect must similarly be integrated into our perspective on educational experiences (Linnenbrink 2006, 312–313).

### **3.2. EMOTIONS AND ARCHIVAL EXHIBITIONS**

Contributions specifically addressing emotions in relation to archival exhibitions could not be found. However, insights from museum exhibitions can be applied to archival exhibitions. For instance, Brenda Trofanenko's work (Trofanenko, 2011), while focused on museum exhibitions, also touches on archival pedagogy. Her study primarily examines photographs, which are relevant to archives that often curate similar exhibitions. The article explores the emotions elicited by war photographs in viewers, noting that these emotions are intensified if visitors have previously interacted with veterans who experienced the war first-hand.

Baier (2023) claims that emotions play a significant part in the lives of humans, and how they perceive and experience the world around them. Despite this, many museum professionals still seem to prioritize engaging their visitors' intellect over stirring their emotions. However, they should recognize the important role emotions can play in an exhibition, especially when presenting specific and often traumatic events from the past. It is crucial to analyse the variability of emotional

responses, as a single object can elicit entirely different emotional impacts depending on the observer. The interpretation of historical events is inherently subject to diverse perspectives. One must be aware of the potentially contradictory emotional reactions that visitors may experience (Baier, 2023, 42–43).

Frevert and Schmidt (2011) discuss an exhibition from the 1980s dedicated to Prussia, a topic sensitive to Germans. This exhibition, titled *Preußen – Versuch einer Bilanz*, vividly illustrated Prussian history through a collection of everyday objects and personal memories. Forty years ago, this represented a novel museum concept that relied heavily on the epistemological power of emotions. The exhibition catalogue described emotional engagement as a “path to understanding.” Objects imbued with emotional significance were intended to illuminate specific periods, events, biographical connections, and fates, allowing visitors to experience and relive them. Aware of critiques of such “sentimental” approaches, the curators supplemented the exhibits with explanatory and contextual commentary. They argued that learning and understanding history require both “categories that are entirely rational” in the form of texts and emotionally charged visual representations, such as exhibits. Only their combined effect can bring history to life and imprint it permanently on memory (Frevert & Schmidt, 2011, 8–10).

Emotions play a crucial role in determining what attracts visitors to exhibitions. Understanding how to design an archival exhibition that emotionally resonates with visitors is crucial, as this can motivate them to engage more deeply with the content, fostering learning, exploration of new topics, and connecting detailed information with already known facts. Given the significant role of lifelong learning, it is important to explore the elements that influence motivation for informal learning. Archival exhibitions contribute to this learning process, and considering that archival materials can be effectively utilized in various interactive applications—likely to become increasingly popular in the future—it’s important to determine which documents archivists should prepare and present to the broader public. (Horvat, 2024).

### 3.3. THE IMPACT OF EMOTIONS ON THE WORK OF ARCHIVISTS

A range of contributions addresses the emotions experienced by archivists in their work. Farrugia (2022), for example, mentions archivists’ experiences with

users who often find distressing documents about their families in the archives. Another article, based on interviews with 27 archivists, reports on how archivists cope with the grief of donors or researchers, or with the emotional challenges of working with archival materials (Regehr et al., 2022). Nyitray and Reijerkek (2022) discuss emotions from the perspective of an archivist's responsibility for collections, the accountability that comes with ensuring the material's security, and the process of acquiring collections. Saramo (2021) reports on visits to places she had previously studied in archival documents. Based on interviews with 21 archivists from Canada and the USA, the authors (Regehr et al., 2022) explore some of the unpleasant emotions that documents evoke in archivists. Riegler (2023) acknowledges that although there are strict rules for archiving, not everything can be handled according to these rules, and sometimes individual decisions, which may be influenced by emotions, must be made. She highlights the challenge of maintaining objectivity in the valorisation of archival material and touches on the concept of nostalgia as a social phenomenon driven by a longing for the past. Nostalgic memories are triggered by sensory perceptions of objects, images, sound, and video recordings. Recent digitalization efforts are well-suited to archives, as archival materials are predominantly two-dimensional, meaning no dimension is lost in the digitalization process. Thus, the past has found a place in the present for a broader audience through nostalgic memories evoked by digitally accessible materials online.

### **3.4. THE INFLUENCE OF EMOTIONS ON THE WORK OF RESEARCHERS OR HISTORIANS**

Similar to how archival material evokes different emotions in archivists, it also affects researchers, including historians, genealogists, and others. The distinction between contributions focusing on this theme and those dealing with the effects on archivists mentioned earlier is not clear-cut, and the two topics often overlap. An article on compassionate or empathetic perspectives on history examines a database of transcribed 18th century letters. Sara Fox (2022) developed a questionnaire for historians researching these letters, in which they reflect on emotions, including cases where researchers disagree with the individuals they study. The article also discusses what empathy is and whether it is genuinely possible in historical research or merely fictional. Additionally, there is a discussion on ethnological re-

search using family photographs (Tyshchenko, Tkachuk, 2022), which are shown to interviewees to help them talk more openly about their memories of traditional customs and ceremonies. In addition to the photographs serving as a starting point, ethnologists use classic questionnaires, while the photographs evoke pleasant emotions that lead to better descriptions of past customs. An article by Emily Bruce (Bruce, 2021) considers the impact of historians' emotions on research about the history of childhood and youth. She questions how historians' emotional frameworks and memories influence their understanding of emotions such as love, fear, hope, and pride that appear in archival sources. Bruce suggests a series of methodological reflections for studying childhood and adolescence.

### **3.5. PHILOSOPHICAL-THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS ON EMOTIONS IN ARCHIVES**

The final group of articles explores the emotions associated with archives from a philosophical or theoretical perspective, with Cifor (2015) providing a detailed analysis through affect theory. Cifor's work highlights three key areas:

- Influence on Appraisal: Affect theory affects decisions about which archival materials to preserve or discard.
- Archivist as Witness: If archivists observe social injustices in historical documents, they have a responsibility to address these issues publicly. Failing to do so perpetuates new injustices.
- Impact of Neoliberal Ideology: Archivists must critically assess and distance themselves from societal and political demands to counteract harmful and unjust dynamics.

Cifor also emphasizes that a critical perspective reveals archives as spaces and instruments of power, contributing to both justice and injustice. Affect theory is crucial for understanding and advancing social justice in archival contexts. It helps identify and examine the conditions that have led to past injustices and oppression and provides tools for improving archival practices. This includes re-evaluating functions such as appraisal, witnessing, and access, particularly within the neoliberal context. Furthermore, affect theory offers means to challenge dominant structures of power and privilege, fostering more equitable futures for all affected by archival practices. For archivists and scholars to meet

the needs of various stakeholders – past, present, and future – they must engage critically with affect and its theoretical implications in archival work and research (Cifor, 2015).

Similarly, Raab (2023) critically examines contemporary society, noting that a society without a future tends to look back to the past. If we consider the time elapsed between an event and the emergence of nostalgia for that event, we see that it is becoming increasingly shorter.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the collected literature, it can be summarized that the study of emotions in archives is a relatively young field, with the first conference on this topic held in 2014 in Los Angeles.

Some parallels can be drawn from research in related fields. In the field of pedagogy, for example, it has been found that emotions play a significant role in motivation and memory, and these findings can be effectively applied to archival pedagogy and exhibitions. Archival exhibitions, on the other hand, can be well compared to museum exhibitions, for which more research has already been conducted. The impact of emotions on researchers, particularly historians, can be meaningfully compared to the effects of emotions on archivists in their daily work with archival materials.

Emotions play a significant role in motivating the exploration of new content, especially in the contexts of archival pedagogy and archival exhibitions. They also influence how archivists and researchers perceive and interact with archival documents, highlighting the subjective dimensions of archival work. These findings suggest substantial opportunities for further research, which could either deepen existing knowledge or explore new segments of archival practice where the impact of emotions is evident. Given the ongoing emergence of new publications, continuous literature review will be necessary. Structuring this extensive topic into specific areas, as suggested in this text, appears both reasonable and practical, although additional relevant areas will likely emerge with future research.



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