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Characterized by their structure, standards, and unique collections of records, archival repositories have maintained their distinct identities in the field of information science as their practices have evolved and adapted over time. The concept of context has distinct roles in repositories, in theory and practice, but it is also flexible in how it may be precisely described and understood. This study examines the innerworkings of five rare archival repositories as they consider and understand this concept of context and the impact it has within each organization. All archives hold unique records, but this study addresses those with more highly specialized materials. Comparisons are made amongst the interviewed repositories, as well as with archival and information science practices overall. The results display a range of impact in how context influences the archivists and repositories overall, but the rare nature of the records is a driving force in curating and interacting with the repositories' internal environment and external community.

Headings:

Archives standards

Decision making in library science

Archives users

EXPLORATION OF CONTEXT IN WIDESPREAD
AND SUBJECTIVE APPLICATION:
A STUDY WITH ARCHIVISTS OF RARE REPOSITORIES
IN THE UNITED STATES

by
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Introduction

Context may act as a practical tool, a harsh reminder, an opportunity, and more. Archivists define it for themselves, for their repositories, and thus, for their patrons and partners. Context may be approached differently, but the differences have to be defined and explicitly stated so that the value of the context does not become lost. This study will detail the physical and conceptual representations of context, within certain archival collections, understood and utilized by the respective archivists, defined in its range and scope, inherent or created, concrete or malleable, and the danger in misuse or neglect.

Within archival science and scholarship, the term “context” receives noticeable mention and inclusion, but often steps aside for *respect des fonds* and provenance to receive more detailed and frequent explanation and definition. This paper will address these concepts to duly note their qualities as identifiers of the field, but primarily focus on and address context alone – as a term, concept, guideline, justification, and more, as it is perceived and understood in various rare repositories.

Archives are inherently unique by nature of their collections. In this study, “rare repositories” refer to those that are often non-text-based, hold records of specific cultural restrictions, and include items more commonly seen in personal private collections. It is not just the records themselves that display rare or unique qualities, but the type of records and collections overall, compared to, for example, unpublished scholarly

research. These archives are physical, though record form may vary, and though they may have partnerships or parent organizations, they still stand in their own right.

The philosopher John Searle, among his other research, is known for coining the term “institutional facts” and addressing their comparison with “brute facts,” stating, “Institutional facts are so called because they require human institutions for their existence... Brute facts require no human institutions for their existence” (1995, p. 2). Archives exist purely in and of institutional facts, but the concept of this distinction, the idea of “universals” even, is open to discussion in the variation and sub-categorization of repositories. The research that follows inquires what we universally classify and require, and what has subjective application, and the reasoning for each. By nature, humans interpret and communicate through individual, subjective perspectives. This study nonetheless seeks to analyze where these perspectives still overlap and agree, and where they may firmly stand is disagreement.

The interviewed participants each work with collections that have pushed them into an interdisciplinary frontier that their repositories have helped pioneer. Some of the repositories researched for prospective participation are concerned with protected languages, niche hobby interests, innovative techniques of certain industries, and archaeological sites. Still, the impact of their work winds back across information and archival science to comment on and relate to the field as a whole.

Archives have expanded in form since their conception, a field of naturally distinct records and collections, now encompassing numerous characteristics of human history and culture. Within the greater field of library information science, distinctions between the concept of a museum, library, and archive still plainly exist, and this study is

does not seek to realign these boundaries. Nonetheless, the boundaries of the conception of the archive have expanded in more modern eras, reflecting the incredible capacity of the human mind for creation. Innovation and invention are often patternless in estimation and prediction; archivists cannot predict what repositories may arise in the future or what records will be created. In this way, like many education theories, archives must continue to adapt a constructivist approach to maintain adaptive frameworks in preparation for potential collection needs. Through a series of interviews with those who work with collections in line with the expanding definitions of archives, the results drawn from this study contribute to the interdisciplinary and archival understanding of context. This study asks the question of how does the understanding of “context” as an overarching concept in varied rare repositories impact archival practices and decision making?

Literature Review

Defining Archives

About 85 years ago, Jenkinson wrote of how “some of us should be concerned with the keeping of the Archives of the past and perhaps with the making of the Archives of the future” (1937, p. 2). Herein lies the heart of the premise of this study, defining archives of the past and examining the potential in archives of the future, how the foundational techniques and concepts impact the increasingly diverse archival repositories that are formed. Though the collections in this study differ from Jenkinson’s definition of documental archives, they do fall under how, “Archives as a term must be extended to collections made by private or semi-private bodies or persons, acting in their official or business capacities” (Jenkinson, 1937, p. 8). Jenkinson’s theories stood out in

their distinct approach to archives, and the modern profession has continued to expand upon and extend his ideas.

Defining archives has commonly centered on answering “what?”: what are archives, what is their purpose, what location and access should they have, etc. Modern scholarship brings to the forefront the importance of answering “who?” as well. In comparison with “Schellenberg’s specialized users” as well as “Jenkinson’s state administrators,” Cook writes that “society must be allowed to define its own values” (1997, p. 30). Our society has an opinion on what is archived just as they are then in turn impacted by what is already preserved; the people and records alike influence the archive. The modern archive, digital or physical, faces the challenge of clarification versus a reclassification or redefinition, or a “reconceiving” as Cook puts it (1997, p. 48). The prefix indicates a cyclical notion, but the root verb Cook uses illustrates the modern challenge is not to find a synonym equivalent, but to directly address the potential changes within the frame of archives, and conceive of ways to respond to changing needs of the profession and field.

In Boles’ and Greene’s analysis of American appraisal theory, they astutely comment that since the “American record environment” has faced such dynamic forces and endeavors in the 20th century, it causes no surprise that American archivists may feel “tension between pre-existing theoretical constructs and contemporary reality” (1996, p. 299). For decades now, uncertainty and debate are almost inherent in the discussion. Largely, much of these renewed discussions centers around the arrival of the digital age, but the dynamic quality of change within the field can be examined in other aspects or catalysts within this ‘contemporary reality.’

Francis Blouin wrote on archives and social memory, how these definitions and discussion are no longer the tense comparison of archivists and historians, a divide of a former age, instead focusing on “what defines notions of past” and the care to note when definitions refine or constrain understanding (Blouin, 1999). The collection of essays from the Sawyer Seminar two after Blouin’ article continued in this topic. Bartlett wrote on art archives and still maintained that text is the currency of archives, appropriated for the intent of mediating even non-textual archives and records (2007, p. 121). Archives have handled language like a skilled sculptor wields tools on stone and clay, in order to form it into a desired result. Archives form “modern memory” and their respective records “give meaning to memories” through context and narrative (Blouin & Rosenberg, 2007, pp. 166-167). These institutions of memory have their own inherent power to shape the world around them.

The diversity of archival goals, even those within a single repository, culminates in the modern archive, exemplified “in a widening gulf between established archival repute and emerging archival reality” (Lowenthal, 2007, p. 193). Lowenthal wrote this two decades ago, and though primarily addressing the growing secrecy within archives, the evidence of this “gulf” has continued in prevalence to this day.

Archives have a larger interdisciplinary understanding and metaphorical interpretation of “a cultural, intellectual, and psychological ecosystem with no fixed boundaries” (Cunningham, 2017, p. 55). This approach takes the concept of archives beyond a strict form of physical location, or any physical form at all. Note that this is one form archives take, not to remove them from the grounding in the physical, not to hide the origin, but highlight the potential and the life within. The mission, form, and function

of the archive constantly change, facing critique and commendation, demonstrative of “the dynamic nature of human experience” (Cunningham, 2017, p. 55). Cunningham’s chapter entitled, “Archives as a place,” reads as if to describe “archives as a place or state of being.” Archival theory, practice, and tradition are closely tied to physical repositories, but their understanding extends beyond.

Laura Millar discusses how archives can refer to the record, the institution, or the building; that “Archives are defined not by their form but by their purpose” (2017, p. 4). Despite this approach, Millar continues on to say that archives still have to exist in a concrete form (2017, p. 5). Evidential value for archives derives from the qualities of content, context, and structure (Millar, 2017, p. 9). The term “value” once more questions interpretation whether it should be quantified or qualified, particularly in conjunction with evidence. Archives have undeniably grown in their reach, ability, strength, as well as both internal and external impact through interpretation.

Perception Affecting Understanding

Terry Cook references how the concepts of description and arrangement are of primary focus in “the pioneering Dutch *Manual*,” with consequentially little focus on appraisal and selection (1997, p. 21). Cook elaborates to say this is not to indicate that these concepts are ignored or neglected, but are indicative of how personal and private archival collections were dismissed in favor of libraries (1997, p. 21). Archives are undoubtedly invaluable monuments and tools for the study of human history and culture, yet their specific characteristics refine their connection to the scholarship of information science through their values of appraisal and selection, alongside description and arrangement. Context in the consideration of rare archival repositories considers all the

foundational values and questions when and where descriptions and application need to be reframed or reformed in some way. Governing principles like provenance and *respect des fonds* are questioned for what precisely they govern – at what point in the process, in an archive’s existence, or general archival efforts, do they claim precedence in decisions?

Perception and understanding impact the public and archival repository users, but a different dynamic also exists within the internal field and profession. Haworth succinctly describes the almost backwards loop design to archival description in pulling from the context at and of record creation, to “describe the content, structure and context of the records, and thereby protect the impartiality and authenticity of evidence” (2001, p. 9). Haworth references many of these core ideas inherent in archival science, and “the primary mission of the archivist” being describing archival materials with the dual and subsequent purpose of making them available for use (2001, p. 11). While it may seem an adoption of core principles such as these would create a more harmonious though varied perception and understanding of archives, but as seen in the work of Haworth and others, the key lies in how these scholars propose archivists “realize” the mission (2001, p. 11). Authority and definition here begin their branching. Splitting *respect des fonds* into the external structure and context of provenance, and the internal structure and content, according to Haworth’s presentation, the realization comes through revelation in analysis and characterization in archival description (2001, p. 13). Haworth aims for a detailed structure in presentation in an attempt to avoid the potential pitfalls of extreme simplicity creating misunderstanding, and intensive detail limiting the nature of archives.

Archival practices, such as those of description and arrangement, consider all characteristics of repositories and records to ensure proper principles and policies are

maintained, and embracing discovery in turn (Higgins, 2014, p. 2). This dual reflection of practices is noted in the discovery conducted within the accessioning process and all subsequent points in a record's lifecycle. This relationship of structure and flexibility, if insufficiently maintained and cultivated, risks the burden falling to users to pursue contextual detail, as Higgins, Hilton, and Dafis discuss, to the point of this detail being "out-sourced" to simply gain the perceived level of necessity of contextual information (2014, p. 2). User-interpretation is inevitable and encouraged within the proper setting, but it is not a reliance or a tool to excuse the exchange of responsibility. With this progression in theory and practice noted, even the terms of description and arrangement Higgins, Hilton, and Dafis use can be perceived in a narrow manner. These authors address these topics in the context of the digital age. Though this study does not focus on digital repositories, the digital age allows context to be presented or originate in digital forms, so the principles are rethought in the context of digital components met with rare form and content. Within the same field, definitions and understandings vary. The importance of context is not debated in archival scholarship, but the variation does then encourage or require close examination.

Context of Context

To those unfamiliar with the various fields within library and information sciences, archives may often be lumped in as just a type of library. Those within these fields know well the differences are key; the details create the identity. Libraries collect and promote information to be readily available and accessible. Archives still serve to provide access to their collections, but the nature of their records being more unique and rare tends to place more restrictions or guidelines in regards to access for the sake of

proper preservation of the records. Access is a purpose for both, but the terms of use differ. Libraries and archives have many similarities in practice and value, but these distinctions still separate the context of library and archival collections. Context, per its etymological origin, is the thread that binds. This study addresses the technical and conceptual definitions, associations, and techniques related to context in archival settings, specifically those considered rare in collection and understanding even within the field of archives.

T.R. Schellenberg, writing before the digital age, understood context as physical location and origin primarily, that if records were removed from such, “they lose much of their meaning as a record” (Schellenberg, 1999). Schellenberg held closely to the Greek origin of the word “archive,” referencing the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition and etymological delineation in his introduction to his work (Schellenberg, 1999, p. 3). The Greek *archontes* were granted legitimacy and power largely due to the legal documents they kept in the *archeion* (Cunningham, 2017, p. 59). Archives were specific, direct, with known confines and description of their identities. Archivists do not all work from the perspective of Schellenberg’s realm of government records, but the consideration of context providing identifiable justification as well as description is not without merit, especially when the modern age juggles information overload with the simultaneous ability to find and keep track of more information.

Prior to more recent decades, archival principles found their origin in inspiration and need in “solving problems in the arrangement and description of older records” (Cook, 1997, p. 25). Context serves a purpose, but it no longer needs to always solve a problem. This is to say, it should exist beyond the purpose of solving a problem such as a

haphazardly rearranged collection. Context can be utilized for potential use and interest as well as solving problems of the past and questions of the present.

“Context” appears frequently in archival scholarship, and in library information science literature on a larger scale. More frequently seen in reference to provenance and *respect des fonds*, it exists in the theoretical studies, and in the minute examples of record description. Pushed by the rise of the digital age and new needs formed as a result, “the focus has shifted, therefore, from the actual record to its functional process or context of creation” (Cook, 1997, p. 45). Context has theoretical foundations, but also a very active and actionable role in appraisal and daily operations of repositories. It considers the specific characteristics of a record in addition to the greater cultural and historical impact.

Context always refers back to something. In order for records to be accurately understood in full, we must first “[understand] the environment and motivation that affected their creation and use” (Szary, 2006, p. 218). The creation is understood through its creating. This understanding, the context, is neither auxiliary nor supplemental, but essential (Szary, 2006, p. 218). The value of context has not been contested perhaps as much as the designation of responsibility for it. Traditionally, its access in collection and use has fallen to the researcher, in preliminary and simultaneous efforts with other research methods (Szary, 2006, p. 218). There is a logic evident in this approach, with the idea of a subjective interpretation in the application of a record and its context to individual research pursuits. Nonetheless, context does not have to be communicated in every conceivable manner in order to still provide valuable information. Research costs time and more time, and having context “readily available to support” contributes to the overall user experience, respect, and quality of the research itself (Szary, 2006, p. 219).

This phrasing is key, as the context should not merely be available that it might support, but its availability should have the inherent purpose and intention of support. Context buried within large blocks of text is not built or understood with a supportive purpose.

Though not necessarily used interchangeably, the concepts of context and provenance are often referenced in the same breath. Provenance appears as an umbrella, continuously growing to cover the ever-expanding context, though the seams between the two are somewhat indistinguishable (Douglas, 2017, p. 40). These words are far from synonyms of each other, but within the field and discussion of archives, their connections have to be addressed.

Laura Millar synthesized the theory and description of context quite well, “If content is the ‘what’ and structure the ‘how’, context is everything else: the ‘who’, ‘where’, ‘when’ and possibly even ‘why’” (2017, p. 13). The reason why context can be difficult to define is that it encompasses so many components, each integral to the identity of documents and records, and repositories. It is not subject to boundaries of time, space, language, etc. Context may interact with any manner of evidential sources. Identifying archival materials “is an art, not a science,” regardless of criteria and standards, the concept and characteristic of context contributes to the very relative nature of distinctive definition (Millar, 2017, p. 17).

Impact and Rhetoric

With the mindset of ‘it’s an art, not a science’ also comes a refreshed justification, “socio-cultural” in nature, without the need or fact of every archive solely situated in state matters (Cook, 1997, pp. 43-44). Archives do not merely interact on one level with the public; they must take into account the public as a daily consideration in various

aspects of archival practices, with numerous potential means of access and interaction. Repositories can offer to users a more targeted and considerate service, “a sense of identity, locality, history, culture, and personal and collective memory” (Cook, 1997, p. 44). This rhetoric does not limit or weaken the impact and prestige of an archive, in fact it has quite the opposite effect. However, limitations can and do exist in the resulting costly resources required to maintain an archive.

Archival theory and practice as a whole have generally taken on more active roles, within and extending beyond repository walls. Diction plays a key factor in this understanding. Archivists interpret, set, select, describe, promote, justify, and they create; they have become “active builders of their own ‘houses of memory’” (Cook, 1997, p. 46). “The pendulum of thought swings back and forth” between past and present, creating designs not in the sand but in clay tablets that have the ability to harden with time, memorializing the impressions (Cook, 1997, p. 47). The public only sees one image of the design, they are unfamiliar with the entire process, or even where the momentum will continue in the future. Archivists are responsible for the explanation and understanding of the pendulum swing, for the curiosity of the public, and the discussion amongst different repositories within the field of archives overall. Though archival theory and practice may have one primary pendulum, each individual repository have may its own, making certain adjustments to the pattern in order to better represent and serve their specific collections.

Methodology

Overview

This study employed qualitative methods, with individual interviews in a semi-structured format. At the time of the interviews, interviewees were full-time employees of

rare archival repositories. Qualitative research notes and supports “the importance of reporting the complexity of a situation” (Creswell, 2018, p. 4). Qualitative methods also help provide “a common language to analyze and evaluate interdisciplinary work,” (Silverman, 2021, p. 2). Information science fields are interdisciplinary to certain degrees, but the repositories for this study in particular touch multiple fields, discussions, and therefore, definitions. To speak broadly of the types of archives considered, dance differs from organic matter, art differs from sounds, technological innovation differs from languages, etc. Thus, this study sought detailed interviews to reverse engineer common themes. Not with strict intent, the nature of this study and approach of the research question slightly followed along social constructivism, seeking no one common result, but to have listened and analyzed each individual perception of participant settings. Interpretation may flow from “personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (Creswell, 2018, p. 8). Analysis is a powerful tool and instincts should never be ignored, but interpretation should also never be hastily applied, lest it create partial or imperfect understandings. Archivists cannot control how users will interpret context, but they still make it accessible.

Quantitative methods, or a mixed methods approach, were removed from consideration due to time requirements for appropriate depth, and the inability to capture the essence of the study. This study did not seek to measure, estimate, or calculate context, or compare strict statistics, but to unearth the perceptions and interpretations of context in the respective settings of each repository, through the lens of each participant, and seek to make the results “accessible to a broad audience” (Silverman, 2021, p. 2). A

larger scale or follow up of this study might see more potential benefits from quantitative methods, but qualitative, in spite of possible biases, best supported the design.

Qualitative interviews, when properly conducted, use flexibility as a strength rather than a risk. Within them, “a set of various theoretical viewpoints can be considered and, when there are reasons for doing so, applied” (Alvesson, 2011, p. 4). This study drew upon previous research founded in various methodologies, but did not approach the interviews with a preconceived set of coding values. Interviews are often argued against for reason that “any meaning pulled out of interviews... is contestable” (Alvesson, 2011, p. 6). However, this very fact is largely the point of this study, and thus to be highlighted – no matter how precisely something may be defined, nothing is truly free from interpretation and possible variance.

Analysis and coding largely drew on thematic analysis post-interviews. Common themes were analyzed within the data, then excerpts of that data were accordingly coded into those themes (Cassell, 2013). One benefit of this method lies in the dual use of template coding a priori or posteriori, “depending on how inductive the researcher wishes the data analytic process to be” (Cassell, 2013). This study pursued how context is seen and treated within archival institutions, analyzed through the themes found through the interviews with how the archivists consider and utilize the concept.

Positionality Statement

To address my own person and position relevant to the subject matter, I am of course analyzing a field of which I am an active member. As a relatively young student, my experience with and understanding of context has formed through a background primarily in other fields, and with less professional experience in library information

sciences than many contemporaries. Less experience indicates fewer contacts and connection resources, thus less knowledge of existing potential sources.

I am a young, white, female, American, who's only true language fluency is English. This has the potential to affect who and where I have access to, due to time zone scheduling compatibility, language barriers, and general interest in master's student work as opposed to a higher academic or professional research project. Potential participants may prefer someone more well-established in the field, to interview with in general, but also to feel more comfortable with, sharing more naturally. Lastly, the existence of my interest in conducting this study indicates potential bias in my own perception and interpretation of context, which could affect my presentation of the data analyzed from interviews. Context is a commonly known concept, but I must take care not to place any extra degree of perceived value or potential application in it due to my interest. This can be identified through diction, tone and emphasis, and physical mannerisms.

Data Collection

Archival institutions, as defined for the purposes of this study, refer to any organization or repository that applies archival techniques, theories, standards, and goals to their collections, regardless of the specific materials in the collection(s). This study strays away from the more commonly known repositories in academic, community, and rare books categories or settings. Though each repository of these is undoubtedly unique in their collections, their categorical concepts are more established in archival science with regards to their records. This study intended to seek out repositories that may be able to indirectly apply archival teachings, but have little to no similar peer institutions from which to draw comparisons or insight in the structuring of the archive.

Nonprobability sampling was employed for data collection, largely due to the small scale of desired interviews, confined time frame, and specialized features of potential sources. The population has large spatial distribution, and with archives' generally regulated accessibility, the population better fits nonprobability sampling's flexibility in adapting to the population needs (Daniel, 2012, p. 75). All participants speak fluent English and reside in the United States.

Many repositories that meet these characteristics may use alternative terms in their names and classifications, and do not belong to dedicated listservs due to their unique natures. The sample was generated through thorough internet searches, comprised of various keywords and combinations such as, but not limited to: context, collection, rare, unique, special, archive, and repository. Keywords of categories by field were also employed, including: art, language, plant, invention, archaeology, sound, and more. Words specifically pertaining to libraries or museums were not utilized in direct searches. Additionally, lists of archives by state, region, country, and content-matter were searched for and examined in depth. Various blog posts, academic, travel, and otherwise, were also examined with reference to types of repositories. News articles, LIS organizational sites, and references on the more traditional and established repository sites were also sought.

The initial research perused a few hundred listings. Results were further narrowed after definition, determining the collection/repository is still in existence, and is professionally and officially managed, rather than a mere personal collection. If an identified repository met the initial criteria but did not have a dedicated full-time staff member whose job position title and/or description did not reference a primary focus on archival management and understanding, the repository was removed from consideration.

No requirement for level or method of public access was used other than that the access exists in some form and the repository held a physical form. Repositories varied from partnerships or parent-relationships with various museums, universities, or other organizations, in a wide range of degree in association. The resulting sample formed a list consisting of repositories that differ enough in collection items so as to not appear too similar in niche categorization.

Participants were identified through their repository websites and contacted via email with details on the study and a consent form (Appendices A & B). Out of those contacted, 2 email addresses were no longer valid, 2 required confirmation by phone of the email recipient, and 2 redirected and forwarded the email to another staff member who they felt would be able to contribute more based on the study's focus. A preliminary total of 7 of 20 potential participants responded to express interest in the study and another requested further information before confirmation. Of these initial responses, interviews were confirmed for a final total of 5 participants, all of whom agreed to video interviews and allowed audio/video recordings. Participants detailed their experience at their current repository as ranging from less than 2 years to over 15.

Participants were contacted via email with details on the study, including IRB approval information. Upon agreement of participant, interviews were subsequently scheduled individually, via either video or audio call depending on participant preference. Interviews were recorded, later deleted and destroyed upon the completion of transcriptions. Contact with participants spanned from initial interest recruitment to the completion of the interview. No follow-up series of questions were conducted; however, 2 out of 5 requested to be notified and sent a copy of the thesis once completed.

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. The questions asked centered around themes of how context is viewed and how it is responded to/interacted with.

The study was knowingly designed to address a very niche selection of archival repositories; it therefore did not come as a surprise to find a number of potentially matching repositories that did not have a staff member listed with either the desired education and/experience. Additionally, for those contacted who did meet these parameters, it can also be assumed that they held demanding schedules that may not have allowed for consideration in participating in this study due to the investment and time commitment. A smaller percentage of participants initially agreed than was expected, which did prompt continued rounds of emails sent out. However, though this study cannot generalize participants' responses to be equally indicative of every such unique repository within the US, it does provide findings and insight to highlighting the work of these repositories and examine the existing and potential relations between archives in tradition and looking forward.

Results

Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured and the questions were asked of all participants in the same order, though overlap and repetition in responses did often occur depending on what participants referenced in their discussion, along with their general understanding of certain questions (Appendix C).

- I. What do you consider important characteristics of the collection(s) as a whole, as well as of individual items?*

This question was asked with the intention of grounding the participant and interview in a topic they frequently consider, thus granting greater ease of effort in response. It also was designed to create an initial sense of identity which, in potentially both the interviews and later data analysis, could be referred back to in consideration of the more abstract factors and influences discussed further on.

- Each participant discussed the greater field the content of their records represented, be it in a specific visual art, industry, cultural studies, etc. They also addressed where their repository was positioned in regards to a leading entity in that field, of an individual or organization, and how they defined the respective types of records. The connection was considered with respect to a “nebulous” element characteristic to the records, or direct association via origin in creation or accession (Interviewee II).
- Four of the participants detailed the form of their records, if digital or analog, physical size, degree of interaction, and many more factors that both they and their public would note – how individuals interact with the records.
- Another set of four of the participants discussed the origin of the repository and records more in depth, a foundational characteristic that offers a more complete picture when archive users know it as each archive strives to ensure its mission continues from the time of its conception.
- Four gave some form of a “We are...” response that reads as a 1-2 sentence tag-line identity to present a clear and concise public description.
- In two of the interviews, the physical space of the repository in layout and design was addressed.

- Two participants referenced another repository or organization for comparison, whether directly connection to collection materials, or more in regards to the structure and values of the organization.
- One interviewee detailed how the individual items at the repository push the archive to carefully consider the projected narrative perception of the records, and how it can create a more inviting nature to patrons (Interviewee V).

II. What does “context” mean to you? How would you explain the “context” of your collection(s) and/or items to visitors/users/interested persons?

The participants varied greatly in their education and experience in archives and LIS fields in general, and the first part of this question sought to draw out the instinctive perceptions of the individual that could potentially refer more to their backgrounds, or their present position and responsibilities. The second part of this question connects the internal foundation to the external connections and impacts.

- All five participants brought up context relating to or representing ‘the reason why’ and the greater purpose of the individual records and collections overall, according to repository missions and personal values.
- Each participant addressed interpretation, that archivists make, but primarily the public, in response to how they experience, understand, and are presented with context. As one commented, “So, really all we do is contextualizing and *contextual*... it all interplays and interconnects” (Interviewee IV).
- The majority of the participants brought up history, of the records and/or of archives as a field. Three addressed the history and relationship with the

parent/associated organization or institution, with two of these persons having mentioned all of the above types of history.

- Three listed an example or two of the effects created by handling context, how its presentation and degree of depth can change perception and even interest in records and a repository.
- Another three acknowledged the difficulty in definitions – in internal contrasting comparisons and in potential outcomes with the public. Though the complexity of the “why” was a truth held by all, each repository has a responsibility to present clarity when called upon. Part of this difficult also stemmed from a lack of control for some, as one participant remarked that they were not always involved by the parent institution in their discussions and decisions in conveying the work of and resources provided by the archive to the public.
- Stability, maintenance, and criteria were highlighted by three. The description and access of context have multiple layers, involving both discovery and decision, with the archivist figuring out the context to the best of their ability, and then “describing [the record] in a way that it can be found” (Interviewee V).
- Only one, in response to this question, discussed specific tools utilized by the repository in association with context, namely, finding aids.
- One of the participants mentioned points falling into all of the above topics.

III. Of what importance is context for your specific archive?

The assumption made by this study is that context does indeed play a role in each of these repositories, but that does not indicate the type or hierarchy of its role, which this question aimed to address.

- Every participant touched on the balance between strong origin ties and modern needs and values. Two spoke of this as a more positive opportunity, one expressed more concern with creating distance for moral and ethical reasons, and two offered pros and cons.
- Additionally, all five briefly addressed or acknowledged general public perception, historical and modern, of LIS professions and organizations. Each also spoke on the trouble with proportional representation, whether through featured records and collections, or simply the repository as a whole, being representative of the records they hold. The individual records, what classifications and characteristics they hold, define the repositories in name and existence, once again returning to the theme in the previous question's responses with context as the "why." One participant described context as a "guidepost," that it cannot be ignored, and that "it steers everything, every decision we really make" (Interviewee IV).
- Making a general comment on internal and external communication, of necessary contextual explanation, one participant noted, "There's more education about what I do, conveying to other people, than I ever thought I would have to do" (Interviewee I).
- Three participants went into detail once more on the purpose and public impact of their repository for its designated and potential community of users. To note, these three, due to no single reason, demonstrated to hold the most public interactions, in terms of variety of individual and purpose of the interaction.

- Each repository deals with both physical and digital records and data, but two directly highlighted how the form and origin of the records played a key role in considering context, specifically how context could appear similar or different based on the form it took, even in the most simplistic adaptation.
- One participant described in detail how the interdisciplinary nature of many of the records further heightened the importance of context for the professional and public identities of the repository. The “worldview” of an individual or repository must be understood in modern and historical context with relation to the records (Interviewee II).

IV. *What, if any, specific relationship do you consider between some or all of: respect des fonds, provenance, and context?*

As noted for the second question, the participants all varied in the depth of their education experience in archival studies, as well as the length of time in the profession. Additionally, the relationships with the parent association, where applicable, contributed to occasional variation in the consideration and the actual action in response.

- Each of the five participants discussed why their records were created in the first place, and came to exist in their repository, with each also noting that these points in a timeline in part contribute to their and their repositories’ responses to archival considerations of *respect des fonds*, provenance, and context.
- All five addressed how prior decisions made before their time or out of their control had created techniques and traditions that may differ from strict archival practices. However, only one participant noted these decisions to be in addition to the current practices and policies, whereas the other four considered how the

decisions had distanced from archival tradition, diminishing a primary concern for *respect des fonds* and provenance. One of these noted that the parent association frequently discussed provenance, but based on the parent's decisions, they would lose the archival sense of provenance.

- The consensus among the above four was the need for at least some organization and structure; uniformity is ideal, but, at least currently, unable to be achieved in a timely manner. These four in particular noted the self-reliance and pressure upon themselves and other archive staff, for any effort or desire to, where able, reconsider the importance and role of *respect des fonds* and provenance in conversations of context and decision processes.
- In the experience of the one participant who noted change only as addition, though indeed noting the “parent-child relationship made clear on our shelves,” the relationship between *respect des fonds*, provenance, and context, on the simplest level, is that all three must exist within the archive, in value and practice.
- The hope or value maintained by all was context's ability to collect the greater story, being the tie that binds and picture of the puzzle, even if some pieces were lost.
- Three participants referenced how their own background contributed directly to their understanding and incorporation of these concepts, with two noting that despite their experience and education, they as familiar with the former two terms, at least in an explicitly practical manner. Interestingly, one participant said their experience in the profession thus far had indicated a greater “looseness with arrangement” in archives than in formal libraries (Interviewee II).

- Two discussed how part of reason for a limited concern of *respect des fonds* and provenance, in favor of context overall, stemmed from their typically high dependence on donors for even the smallest sliver of information, as well as a number of potentially content-sensitive or limited-access records.
- One participant spoke frankly with a comment that provenance was not really a concern for them, due to the type of and acquisition patterns and processes of their records.

V. Does context appear more implicitly or explicitly in daily operations?

While there was the potential for one or multiple repositories to hold strictly to either implicit or explicit, the choice of the word “more” was quite deliberate here, to subtly acknowledge context may often appear in many forms. However, those these two terms are plain comparisons, they are still subject to interpretation in use and reference, which could be reflected in participant responses.

- As a first response, one participant said explicit, two said implicit, one said both, and one required a little more explanation before stating both. Overall, four of the five addressed both implicit and explicit appearances, with one just commenting on the implicit aspects.
- One participant contemplated that context both builds out to implicit from an explicit, physical established character, while also simultaneously “running in two directions” for both (Interviewee I).
- All five participants discussed the physical interaction with the records as a member of one designation.

- Three described how context appears in levels, which better illustrate its dual nature in the scale between the implicit and explicit. These levels connect with the different degrees of control of the archive as well as the various aspects and duties of the archive. As one participant detailed, if pressed to give a more direct description, “[context] originates in an explicit manner and then builds to be ingrained and implicit” (Interviewee IV).
- Four participants referred to how digitization also can include both implicit and explicit components, depending on archivist actions, record form, and public access.
- One participant discussed how context can often be implicit when people visit the archive without considering the concept of context, though they still desire to interact with the collection. Not only can context be implicitly apparent, but implicitly absorbed.
- Another participant referenced the implicit context that visitors themselves bring in, and how, specifically for certain types of records and repositories, “nostalgia’s a huge context” (Interviewee III).

VI. How do you view context on a scale of independent to dependent?

At this point in the interviews, there has been discussion of context’s descriptions, appearances, interactions, value, and theoretical grounding. This study seeks insight into how context might impact archival practices and decisions, but context itself may be a decision, something not just understood but potentially controlled.

- Out of all the questions asked and topics discussed, this question caused the most difficulty or at least initial uncertainty in responding to, with four of the five

participants requesting further explanation and example. Some asked for general description, others asked what precisely “independent” and “dependent” referenced.

- Four participants initially responded with dependent, one said both, but all discussed how context can slide on that scale. While this proportion is worth noting, it is more important to note each individual’s understanding of these two terms, and even the evident processing aloud in response to the question. For example, of the four initial “dependent,” two primarily addressed the historical origins of the records, one discussed the physical mobility and presentation context of records, and another saw the record format as the varying dependency whereas the historical context was independent even if not always known.
- One participant explained how context is both independent and dependent in that a collection cannot be said to stand alone, nevertheless, “each collection has its place for uniqueness, and relativity,” and it is important to ensure researchers and visitors understand this duality (Interviewee IV).
- The origin of the records and collections was mentioned in four of the interviews. One participant specifically discussed interaction of the users at the time of an item’s creation vs. the modern user, that “we can’t travel back in time” to truly maintain the same exact historical context (Interviewee III).
- Two mentioned their repositories’ external reliance for context data. One of these also mentioned how donors can also describe how certain records are more sensitive and require potentially limited access.

- Personal background and experience were mentioned by two participants, in their understanding of and interaction with the records.
- One participant specifically referenced the collection policy of the repository.

VII. Can certain types or definitions of context have limits or boundaries?

The interviews were designed to hopefully gather as full a picture as possible of the understand of context within each individual repository. This final question sought to refine and consolidate all of the prior discussions.

- Each participant discussed the importance of maintenance and consistency, whether this was seen as limitations or not.
- All of the participants also highlighted the value of their records and repository, that the value remained high even if certain contexts did not exist in an ideal manner.
- Four referenced the user's role on this topic, how their different levels of interests, prior knowledge, technological competence, etc. had their own impact, the "context of the user" (Interviewee I).
- Every individual also in some way addressed assumptions, made by the archive staff and public alike, and how these can risk creating too narrow or misplaced of a limit or boundary. The archivists also have to account for future potential revelations of and additions to context made by donors, the public, or found by repository staff.
- One participant responded with an emphatic "yes," but the limits are often quite flexible, that "how we define satisfaction really rules the day," and every

individual involved in the process, in a research endeavor or archival duty, has a role to play (Interviewee IV).

- Three referenced traditional archival practices and standards, not just about forming context into their structures, but that tools like finding aids have limits in their use and adaptation as well, and how there can be a “bubble” of understanding (Interviewee I).
- One participant discussed privacy and personal information in regards to access.
- Another participant commented on the flexibility of context, “It can be everything or nothing,” and “a fun word to throw around” without much reason or grounding (Interviewee III).
- One addressed how limitations do not need to have a negative connotation, sometimes to remain true to a record, rather than favor a more aesthetically full or pleasing presentation, sometimes limits are reasonable and justified.

Data Analysis

Following the interviews, each was transcribed by the interviewer by hand, and subsequent coding was performed manually as well. In-vivo coding was applied in certain but not all sections, primarily when particular descriptive characterizations, action verbs, and emotive responses were noted, often backed by note of specific verbal tone and emphasis evident in the interview even if less clear in the transcription diction. Participant responses were coded and generally annotated with marks of initial instinctive response, what received primary focus, which topics or explanations were repeated, and explicitly referenced influences in thought and opinion, in addition to other notes that arose depending on what participants said. Mention of specific characteristics of the

repository and collection were largely categorized by the physical space, resources, policies, and community. These codes acted as indicators of associations perceived and explicitly noted by participants and the author alike, of collection aspects, deliverables, potential biases, as well as both public and professional influences, among other considerations.

The initial round of coding was characterized by various cyclical edits, within each individual interview, and the transcriptions combined. The complex nature and open discussion of the topic did complicate simplification by coding. A denotative and connotative analysis was performed, of both individual and comparative focus. The coding also applied a focus on comparison, not for the sole purpose of addressing differences or similarities, but to additionally create another layer of self-review, analyzing not through a single lens. Interpretation through guided elucidation, as opposed to piloted supposition. Eliminating redundancy and with reorganization, a final total of six themes were elucidated from the data: Historical Background, Public Connections, Influence and Control, Limitations and Concerns, Core Foundations, and Telling the Story.

Interviews are also subject to recall bias of participants, through something forgotten or unnoticed, or through something deemed not pertinent enough to mention. Occasional potentially serendipitous revelation was reflected in coding, but many potential bites of information are pre-screened and eliminated by the interviewee without mention to the interviewer.

Discussion

The following coding categories are listed and used not to indicate any attributed level of importance by the author, but structure in a similar progression to the interviews, building from origin, encompassing all potential considerations, and honing in.

Historical Background

Origin is a key concern within an archive. No matter the size of the repository, education of the staff, or form of the records, origin is inherent in the identity. The present is more accurately understood with knowledge of the past. Interviews revealed two aspects of historical background, seen in the prior education and experience of the archivists themselves, and in the connections to and through the repository itself and the records.

All of the participants brought up their personal background and experience with archival tradition and standards. Their education in library information science and archives ranged from purely professional to beyond a master's degree in the field. The participants who did not have as much official technical training and knowledge expressed some wishes to have had such courses while in school, but that it had not proven too much of a barrier. Additionally, participants who did pursue the field in their education also described potential gaps in their education, either in response to the questions asked in the interview, or with regards to their duties.

Participants with alternate backgrounds seemed to hold a unique view of its impact on their work. It afforded them potentially greater comfort in acknowledging limited resources and ability, the necessity of adaptability; however, it could also prove

frustrating when they wished to institute some changes and greater archival structure, as their repository was not designed with such practices always in mind.

The relationships held with the repositories' parent or associated institution/organization will be discussed more in depth in a later section, but the setting in which these repositories were founded were of notable value and importance mentioned by all on a personal and institutional level. Some participants expressed a positive view of their repository's origins, others more neutral, and still some mentioned needing extra care to present that context to the public. Maintaining connection, but distancing from issues that may not align with the modern world and the repository's current values. Three of the repositories were started primarily by someone not of an archival or LIS background, but instead by someone in a field related to the record type and content themselves. The interdisciplinary foundations were a noted contributing factor in their current identity as a self-described "unconventional archive" as one participant commented (Interviewee V).

Over the course of their interviews, all of the participants addressed the perceived value of their records over time, even before they were collected. Each of the participants referenced external connections of their collections, and three specifically discussed the role of external reliance for description and understanding purposes. These relationships could be through the donor, through single-occurrence public input, or through continued conversations. The parent institution was often the primary resource for the continued relationships with scholars. As one interviewee discussed, when "the community [who created the records] doesn't really exist anymore," the repository has to rely on external "interpretation" (Interviewee II). The judgements on whether to pursue external input

were made based on specific knowledge and strengths of the archive staff, “[W]e often don’t have the exact knowledge ourselves to be able to adequately describe a lot of the things we have” (Interviewee II).

The added time needed to utilize external connections, in an already resource-consuming task of description, influenced respective decisions of how much effort to devote to description. Participants voiced that while they did not necessarily place limitations on a final level of depth of description, they did have to institute temporary pauses in actively describing a single record, for the sake of the entire collection – “[F]or right now, we see the value in at least getting it to where we have it at least somewhat researched... some context, some description, and keywords, to incorporate into the collection” (Interviewee V).

The multifaceted characteristics of context exist in tandem with the repositories “trying to maintain this... uniformity” (Interviewee I). The repositories have to consider every small type and quality of context, in order to maintain the general context of the archive overall. A few other fields of study and professions were referenced throughout the course of the interviews, in how these overlap with archives. Among these, provenience was discussed, a term used in archaeology and paleontology. Provenience is connected to provenance in regards to an object’s history, but continues further in its use in archaeological dig sites as it refers to an object’s precise geographic point of origin, where it was found in relation to the other artefacts and site as a whole. Archaeological artefacts and modern records will likely never go back to exist in the precise point they were discovered at, but the context of these precise points of origin is invaluable in the understanding of the records.

In archaeology, provenience may reference aspects of both archival provenance and original order, but these concepts are much more distinctly addressed in the latter field. A repository may not have control of how records come to them, “by the time we get materials, often they’re just thrown in a box,” but it can decide what to do from that point on (Interviewee V). Three of the repositories held records that were largely created with the public in mind; two held such records as well, but also contained a great deal of personal work that just so happened to make its way into a repository. Speaking on the context of an archive, each participant voiced their repository’s values for individuality and independence, seeking to highlight what made their records unique and rare, and “emphasize the self-made aspect” of their records as strong ties to the individual, organization, or culture from which they originated. (Interviewee II). This echoes Blouin & Rosenberg’s and Terry Cook’s comments on how archives actively provide meaning for memory.

Public Connections

A repository’s connection to the public exists in relational impact and perception. This connection happens through digital, physical, and human interaction, but the ratio varies according to community demographics and needs. Each of the repositories pursued for this study have a wide range of communities they exist in, serve, and work alongside. Each participant, unprompted, gave at least one 1-2 sentence ‘tag-line’, representative of the repository that might intrigue and explain who they are to a public audience. The interviews continued to break-down the concept of context more, but the simple, straightforward line of context that identifies the entire organization is key in the identity of the repository. The rare nature of the records may merit or request in-depth

explanations, but as the participants noted, the context of records, collections, and standards should strive for similar goals of clarity and honest presentation for the sake of the public. One participant commented that their visitors may not necessarily be thinking of these concerns when they arrive, “But I like to think when they walk in and see [the collection]... they start to think about context” (Interviewee III).

Archives are individual organizations just as they are also representative of archives and the greater fields of their records as a whole. If a record is tied to a certain context relating to a physical, audible, or visual component of interaction, whether or not archivists choose to present that context in such a setting, and how far they may go to achieve it, has the potential to greatly impact public perception. One participant specifically referenced how a record could simultaneously exist in two different contexts, physically and online. The variety of context(s) has already been discussed in part, and the physical and digital components are plainly evident, but the focus here is on the simultaneous nature. The archivists are faced with the question of how to best “merge” the contexts in each iteration, so that there is consistency in description, but not copy and paste in such a way that removes important distinctions (Interviewee I).

Perception is not just passive; representation is not assigned levels of attribution. Archives control conveyance; they may not be the only factor in that control, but the public can see them as the guiding force, researchers rely on them and what they convey through their records. Conveyance takes into account presentation and access, and the potential biases within those. Participants discussed how conveying context has to take care in the balance between fact, facts relative to a certain culture or person, and personal opinion. Speaking of their repository and influences broadly, one participant stated,

“[N]othing about this construct is accidental” (Interviewee IV). Though not said by participants in the same manner explicitly, they all described how archival practices backed with sound reasoning and justification differ from baselessly inserting their own thoughts into what is conveyed to the public. Despite the responsibility of considering the needs and desires of the researcher or user, the archivists are “not trying to impose [their] own thinking about what the material conveys,” but aim “to hold that archival context as one might learn in school or in theory” (Interviewee I).

Each participant discussed how their visitors were comprised of the general public and scholars alike, and how context should serve both. Two repositories in particular that held records with close community or cultural ties spoke of how some visitors were simply interested in their own local or family history and sought those such records. Without conclusive, direct personal or scholarly interest, however, the presentation and form of the record can be intimidating. Particularly with media, certain visitors may be unfamiliar with certain digital formats, and the context identifies for the user why the record is included in the collection to begin with, “first and foremost,” as well helping to understand a particular format (Interviewee V).

The public presents many unknowns, even for the specialized repositories interviewed for this study. Participants described how visitors and users can range from a casual, passing interest in their collections, to students at universities, to scholars decades into their careers with detailed knowledge and pursuits. Particularly due to the rare nature of these collections, these repositories may be met with more hobbyists or public with a piqued curiosity than do other archives of a more traditional nature. Some of the collections held by these repositories have the potential for a more intimate connection

with visitors, connected to cultural heritage, family origin, childhood traditions, etc.; the story matters.

Influence and Control

In line with representation are influence and control, these considerations and forces are a part of any organization, and do not easily step into the background. Before control can be discussed in depth, we will first address the reflective, self-identity from the participants of their repositories. Defining themselves as archives, independent and rare, each participant compared their repository to other archives and similar institutions, most commonly, museums. These comparisons addressed perception and practice alike. The repository that held most closely to archival practices and standards of the five even referenced two different museums as its peer counterparts, with recognition of the structural values, and how museums understand their impact and influence.

Separate from though not ignorant of external forces, there are internal roles of control within an individual repository. Sometimes this appears through the line between enforcement and mediation. Context is too complex a concept to be seen as completely static, so archives work on “instilling those sensibilities in the training process” to smoothly transition new staff in the treatment of context (Interviewee IV). Archivists often have specialties and designated responsibilities. When control is delegated, consistency is of increased importance. Strictly speaking of the internal staff of each repository, three participants highlighted how the depth, understanding, and value of context varied between current and certainly former staff, and discrepancies and disagreements were potential results. One described how a former staff member in charge held a “looser” collection policy, but declined to combine contents of archival boxes to

conserve space (Interviewee II). This meant too many records for very little physical space, and frequent requests for materials on a very tight budget.

In certain scenarios, participants considered the variations to all be valid, so a combination was the proper response, other times, one party ceded to the other, and in a few cases the decision was to keep all variations until a point in time forced consolidation or revealed the best fit. One participant mentioned how they currently maintain multiple, different database-type catalogs, with only one completely public, and how the more internal resources were created by separate individuals, with none “really [knowing] what the other was doing,” (Interviewee III). Upon realization and comparison of these catalogs, the staff saw the extreme depth of information and use in each. Thus, though it perhaps increased a cataloguing backlog, each database is consistently used for the unique characteristics.

The relationship with the parent organization was by far not only the biggest role in the topic of control, but also generally one of if not the most frequently mentioned component of each repository. The five repositories ranged from direct physical and hierarchical connection to a university, museum, or organization, to more of an occasional partnership. Three repositories were more associated with a university, one with a museum, and one with another organization. The context of the records and the context of the entire repository are subject to being primarily and/or initially communicated to the public by the parent organization. Archivists can structure their policies and collections however they may, but these archives sometimes have to correct or redefine their repositories for, if not dedicated researchers, at least the general public, university faculty and students, and partners of the parent organization. This balance in

the relationship with the parent organization can provide opportunity along with restrictions or hurdles.

Close relationships afforded resources to those repositories they indicated would potentially be more inaccessible should that relationship not exist, but it also restricted the archive in other ways, for some. Archival science is a very specialized field, and it can be understandable for a divide in understanding to exist within an organization overall, but certainly not easy.

Any influence or pressure from the parent organization was typically in direct reference to a particular narrative they desired for the archive – what the parent organization wanted from the archive, and how they wanted the archive to appear and serve the public. Three of the five participants expressed difficulty in dealing with disregard for provenance, archival standards, tools, and general structure, in favor of the parent creating their own desired exhibitions and features. One participant discussed how when the parent organization may “blow up a collection,” they then “lose the provenance from an archival perspective,” which causes the archive staff concern especially with they have descriptions online and finding aids that only exist with archival standards in mind (Interviewee I). Nothing quite ripped to the core of the repository, but it did also explain the looser ties to archival science within these repositories; it would simply not be possible within the current setup. The decision then remains, nonetheless, is the parent’s context separate from, above, within, or overlapping with the archive’s and records’ contexts?

Limitations and Concerns

In addition to the more looming presence of a parent institution, there are various components to repository records and an archive's space that create limitations or even cause for concern. Some of these limitations are simply due to how many of the repositories a part of this study can be met with casual public labels of "pretty," "interesting," or even "cool." These classifications may accurately acknowledge the rare and intriguing nature of the records, but the archivists have to then clearly communicate to the public that it is an archive, not a museum.

Context is analyzed in denotation and connotation, but has to be representative enough in either aspect individually that it does not misrepresent. No participant was explicitly asked to justify the decisions made by their repository or themselves, but each fervently discussed their own pressure or desire to discuss and explain at all levels of interaction.

The growing sense gained over the course of these interviews was that the core context of the repository could still change in interpretation, influenced by more localized contexts tied to individual records. Thus, part of understanding context is relevant to perspective. Though this may be the case, removing, altering, or adding something to that core presentation changes some if not all perspectives. Context has a considerable degree of instability, in clarity or maintenance. Four of the participants discussed their thoughts and decisions when dealing with collections that are already re- or disorganized, changed in some way, whether due to their donors, a former archive staff member, or even the parent organization. This somewhat relates to the preservation debate of conversation vs. restoration – how far do we go? Each of the participants cited limited resources as a

primary consideration. Two also noted that they would occasionally receive direct requests for more restoration done of a specific record to improve its accessibility, which they would typically attempt to meet. Generally, however, addendums, outslips, notes, etc. were used to accommodate these changes, at least for the time being. The consensus here is the fight for balance between the desire to honor the full original context of the record, and not going too far so as to destroy the current context, both of course considering the limitation of resources.

The physical needs and design of the archive represent perhaps the most obvious limit in the daily activities of the archive. Physical space was discussed by all the participants, and though more space and resources were ideal, none felt restricted too intensely. Storage rooms and a constant effort towards digitization helped mend this concern. Participants did address that the quality and context of digitization should still be held with the same standards while met with similar resource limitations as physical records. In short, the limitations of the repository should not define and select archival practices for incorporation, but they do end up governing the extent to which these practices like preservation and physical expansion can be employed.

Core Foundations

The core principles, practices, and understandings of these repositories are evidenced in the core of origin, and the core of current practices. Policies were not described in detail in explicit reference, but key words like acquisition, standards, criteria, and more were all discussed. Taking into account limitations of resources, participants largely had open minds about criteria for acquisition, in that, for those actively seeking, the confines were not too narrow that resulted in a voiced concern of missed

opportunities. Rather, policies seemed to be more frequently broadly approached to allow for subjective adaptation based on the circumstances. However, two participants did discuss the effort of their repository to be more direct in desired acquisition habits to prevent an overwhelming influx of unrelated materials coming into the repository. To note, two repositories, regardless of parent organization influence, had more established policies. All participants discussed the responsibility of the repository to the records it currently holds. The approach to policies and standards is what define whether these repositories are merely haphazard collections or dedicated archives of a sort.

A prominent characteristic of most of the interview responses was cautious trust in and understanding of definitions. This appeared with reference to other LIS professions, amongst their individual staffs, and even when speaking with the interviewer. Certain questions were asked to be reworded, terms defined, concepts explained more in depth. What constitutes a valid definition or complete understanding? For the participants in their archival duties as they discussed, a lack of certainty did not provide cause for excuse, nonetheless; knowledge gaps are challenges of opportunity, not firm barriers. Some participants discussed how they had worked in and/or studied archival science prior to their current position, but the “archival meaning of context” was not a primary consideration in daily operations, at least with regard to decisions (Interviewee II).

Although the majority of the participants described a more relaxed relationship with archival tradition and standards, in order to meet the needs of their repositories, all maintained the value of standards overall, and how the distinctions inherent to archives,

even with the special characteristics of their repositories, guide and encourage defined structure in their practices.

I know there's a lot of discourse and scholarship on challenging some of these early paradigms. And I'm not opposed to that at all, I think that's science in a nutshell, is you question. However, I do believe that just like other sciences... you do have certain laws or... paradigms, that either shouldn't shift or just don't shift. And I think *respect des fonds*, and original order, those need to be held onto. Because essentially what we're trying to do is create this context that was understood if not created by the creators of the records themselves. (Interviewee IV).

Telling the Story

The final theme that arose through these interviews and over the course of this study centers around the idea of telling the story of the records and repository. Each repository's collections, as different as they are, all tie back into the science and art of storytelling. As discussed with the parent institution previously, archives also seek to create and form a cohesive narrative for their collections and records. Context acts as the spine for this flexible, multi-faceted narrative; "Context to me, in a nutshell, is the storytelling of human experience" (Interviewee IV).

The contexts of these archives are not an easy story to tell, nonetheless. In discussion of the struggles, inequalities, and efforts of the repository, one participant commented, "I know it chafes on my staff, chafes on me, but that's our reality" (Interviewee I). Numerous factors contribute to what each repository's 'reality' current exists as, and though each maintains vastly different records, as a whole the participants demonstrated possibilities for greater independence, a more respected relationship with the parent, better resources, more archival staff and training, and contextual contributions from the public. The storytelling was an ongoing process with constant potential for edits in every part of the process.

These aims and considerations all have to center around the purpose of a repository, indeed as an organization of that moniker, but more specifically the goals for its individual records and community. Information professionals understand that providing information is not simply handing over a finding aid or checking off boxes, but these repositories in particular approach their purpose as one to create or recreate an experience.

The tools to create this experience would not exist without the archive faculty and staff. For more than one repository, this included student interns or part-time employees. One participant referenced how they seemed to see better general results and harmonious meshing with interns from non-LIS programs, as they had or could learn the necessary technical skills, but better understood the repository's pursuit and style of the storytelling in the archival duties of cataloguing and working with finding aids.

A saying found in multiple fields and settings muses that you have to master the basics and know the rules in order to know when you can break them. The repositories that faced more divide in dancing with the rules, along with a lack of agency at times, struggled not with not knowing the rules, but the ultimate cause lay in how archival standards were not necessarily designed with such rare repositories and records in mind. Telling the story of the records includes this, continues in spite of this. One participant described how their records themselves are a "story-telling medium for people" in their interactions, a tradition to draw on (Interviewee III). A story will always face critique, especially from its creator, but these archivists maintain that the stories of their records are, according to the current capabilities of their repositories, complete.

Archivists consider context in all its forms to create the story. In this study, for some participants the context in and of documents like finding aids acts as a guide of starting points, other participants viewed it as more integral and illustrative of other foundational structured tools. In either approach, there is a story created internally for external impact, but most certainly supplemented through interactions. Each participant clearly illustrated that their patrons and users are not just recipients of their stories but actively written in.

Opportunities for Future Research

Continuing the pursuit of this study could manifest through a larger sample through interviews done with archivists at rare repositories, with more data collection to discern a more complete insight into repository practices. Additionally, a case study designed for this topic would provide the time, conversation, and intimate insight that would create better understanding of how these repositories truly interact with and understand context, seen through the lens of potentially multiple staff within a single repository. Lastly, a two-pronged approach to go beyond the literature of archival science and conduct interviews and/or case studies with archivists at both rare and traditional archives would establish a modern setting in which to examine how the repositories of each category interact with context.

Conclusions

Archives frame their repositories and records for their communities. This study does not suggest any one perfect method or frame, but it seems quite clear and reasonable to suggest that the frame must be considered and understood, ideally early on and by all

stakeholders involved. These rare archival repositories see the picture, the context, as deciding the frame, but there is context in the frame, in the science, as well.

The rare qualities of the repositories in this study occasionally result in them being seen or treated as museums. Additionally, the specialized practices of these repositories have had little direct scholarship as a foundation. As such, the archivists use context to differentiate their repositories from museums, and establish their identity in collections and practices for other rare repositories.

Many artistic professions and pursuits involve a great deal of mathematics in planning and calculation. The artists may not desire viewers to see the math of course, but they do expect the result of the math to be appreciated. Structure doesn't always have to prevent or restrict creativity, sometimes it is precisely what allows more freedom, especially when dealing with a difficult associate or authority.

The varied and complex understandings of context, and its many influencing factors, often push archives into unique positions wherein they must take great care and effort to devise solutions that meet their collections' needs and align with traditional standards. Some repositories may take more of a guidance from the standards and traditions, and flexibly maintain new methods with the story of the context of their records being the driving force. Rare archives are a "refrain" in their echoed repetition of their predecessors (Interviewee IV). The mirrored repetition is perceived differently, but the origin remains clear.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Email Recruitment

Email Subject Line:

Research Study on Context and Archives

Good morning/afternoon [Prospective Participant],

I am writing to inform you of the opportunity to participate in a research study this Spring 2023, regarding the understanding of context in specialized archival repositories. The study is being conducted by myself, Mary Elizabeth, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in pursuit of a Master's Thesis in Library Science. I have included the study's IRB number and consent form documents in this email, for your review, but will provide more initial details below.

You are being contacted for your role at [Archival Repository], which [brief description of repository and its collections, and their relevance to the study]. Please feel no obligation to participate, and should we receive no reply after approximately 7 days' time, we will assume you do not wish to participate and you will not be contacted again. You may also express an explicit wish not to be contacted further about this study via reply to this email or by calling the phone number at the bottom. Additionally, any agreement of contact, request for more information, or general response to this email in no way obligates or enrolls you in this study.

If you would like additional information regarding this study, please reach out via the email address or phone number listed at the bottom of this email. Thank you again for considering this research opportunity.

Sincerely,

Mary Elizabeth Cash

[Email address]

[Cell-phone number]

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
SILS Graduate Student, ARM Concentration
IRB Study#: 22-3179

Appendix B: Research Information Sheet

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Research Information Sheet

IRB Study #: 22-3179

Principal Investigator: Mary Elizabeth Cash

Study Title: Exploration of Context in Widespread and Subjective Application: A Study with Archivists of Rare Repositories in the United States

The purpose of this research study is to examine how context is understood and treated in specialized archival repositories. “Context” will be reviewed as a term, archival concept, relation to user/patron experience, and impact in each repository. You are being asked to take part in this research study because of your role working at a rare, specialized archival repository that is not in one of the more classically common categories such as a community or university archive.

Being in a research study is completely voluntary. You may choose to refrain from participation in this research study. You can also say yes now and change your mind later if you so decide. Should you later change your mind, please let the principal investigator know as soon as you are able, and all as then-collected information of your participation will be deleted from all devices.

If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be asked to schedule a recorded audio or video digital interview with the principal investigator. Your participation in this study, consisting of the interview alone, will take approximately 45-60 minutes. No follow-up survey, call, or interview will be conducted. We expect about 10 people to take part in this research study.

All relevant study information and recordings will be kept in password-protected files and devices. Upon interview completion, the principal investigator will personally transcribe and then delete recordings. Transcriptions will be removed of identifiable information, with a coded key kept in a separate, password-protected file and device. In support of the detailed study focus, we do ask for your consent to be recorded; however, you may choose audio recording only. Should you consent to participate, please check the option that best matches your choice:

- I would like to schedule an audio interview, with audio recording.
- I would like to schedule a video interview, with audio/video recording.
- I would like to schedule a video interview, with audio recording only.

The possible risks to you in taking part in this research are:

- Discomfort with an electronically-conducted interview
- Potential loss of data confidentiality
- Possible recognition of your participation by others

To protect your identity as a research subject, the research data will not be stored alongside your name or identifiable information, nor will the principal investigator share

any information of yours with anyone. In any publication about this research, your name or other private information will not be used or shared.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact the Investigator named at the top of this form by calling (704) 497-7521 or emailing mcash@unc.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the UNC Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

This project was determined to be exempt from federal human subjects research regulations.

Appendix C: Interview Guide

1. What do you consider important characteristics of the collection(s) as a whole, as well as of individual items?
2. What does “context” mean to you? How would you explain the “context” of your collection(s) and/or items to visitors/users/interested persons?
3. Of what importance is context for your specific archive?
4. What, if any, specific relationship do you consider between some or all of: respect des fonds, provenance, and context?
5. Does context appear more implicitly or explicitly in daily operations?
6. How do you view context on a scale of independent to dependent?
7. Can certain types or definitions of context have limits or boundaries?