



The affective dimension of archival work: understanding the thoughts and feelings of archivists who documented the HIV/AIDS epidemic

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Abstract

Introduction. Affect is a vehicle of meaning-making that helps individuals adapt to stressful conditions. Affective experiences help meaning-making during life transitions and crises, but less is known about the affective experiences of information professionals, such as archivists.

Method. Employing a qualitative research approach, we conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with archivists working in LGBTQIA+ archives across the United States. We asked about participants' thoughts and feelings about their work documenting the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States.

Analysis. Our emerging findings are based on an analysis of the first 10 interviews of our dataset. Our data analysis relied on inductive and deductive coding, concept mapping, and memo writing.

Results. Archivists who documented this epidemic had to interact with vast amounts of information about loss and grief. Our participants experienced a physical toll due to this, reflected upon the impact of the epidemic on the LGBTQIA+ community, and felt a range of negative and positive affects.

Conclusion. Archivists' affective experiences are more complex than just burnout. Our preliminary findings suggest that the affective experiences of archivists documenting trauma and crises may not only lead to burnout but also to experience appreciation for the role of solidarity and the positive impact of documentation on the LGBTQIA+ community.

Introduction

Information has an affective dimension (Boehner et al., 2005; Clore et al., 2001). In fact, affects are a type of embodied cognition that matters to information science. Affects are defined as shifts in the psyche. When individuals attach meanings to these shifts with words, these are referred to as *feelings* (Brennan, 2003). As information sources, affects enable individuals to make meaning during life transitions such as when migrating (Allard & Caidi, 2018), undergoing treatment for chronic health conditions (Genuis & Bronstein, 2017), and transitioning genders (Huttunen & Kortelainen, 2021). Meaning-making is associated with greater subjective well-being, especially when individuals are faced with stressful work environments -- such as health-care workers (Krok et al., 2021) and older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lind et al., 2021). Meaning-making has also been shown to increase adaptive responses among disaster survivors (Park, 2016). In other words, affect is a vehicle of meaning-making that enables individuals to increase their subjective well-being and adapt to stressful conditions. Exploring affective experiences is important to the field of information. How individuals interact with information can therefore impact their capacity to adapt to challenging environments and their sense of subjective well-being.

The archival profession is one of the disciplines within the information field where concern about the subjective well-being of information workers has been on the rise. Emerging work has strongly suggested that archivists working with records related to trauma and crises (e.g., extreme weather events, forced migration, armed conflicts) may undergo significant stress (Laurent & Hart, 2021). Tools are being developed to mitigate archivists' burnout (Crisis & Disaster Working Group, 2023; Laurent & Hart, 2021). These tools currently focus on delivering information to people affected by crises, such as protocols for working with victims of extreme weather events or people forcefully displaced due to armed conflicts. Notwithstanding the value of these materials, more work is needed to ensure information professionals, like archivists, have the necessary tools to process the significant stress of engaging in this type of work.

In this article, we report on a project that aims to bridge this gap. We look at the case study of the archivists who documented the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the U.S. The HIV/AIDS epidemic peaked in the 1980s and 1990s. In these twenty years, official estimates account for over eight hundred thousand people who lost their lives to the virus (Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). The LGBTQIA+ community was the most vulnerable, with incidence rates of contagion five to six times higher than the general population (Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Those infected experienced social isolation and were ostracized by their relatives due to fears of contagion and of others learning about the sexual orientation of the infected person (Audet et al., 2013; Emlet, 2006). We posit that archivists who documented the HIV/AIDS epidemic had to interact with vast amounts of information about loss and grief. Therefore, their experiences are revealing of the affective journeys of information professionals handling information related to trauma and crises.

Methods

This article is part of a larger study about the documentation practices of LGBTQIA+ archives. In a prior publication, we discussed the value of community accountability in ensuring the long-term sustainability of these archives (Wagner et al., 2024). In this piece, we sought to answer the question: what are the affective experiences of the archivists who documented the HIV/AIDS epidemic? Following Brennan (2003), we studied the different aspects of affective experiences: physical sensations and feelings and the meanings participants derived from them.

Our data comes from conducting semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2006) with archivists working for LGBTQIA+ archival institutions. Data was collected between May and August of 2023. We compiled a list of 69 LGBTQIA+ archival organizations in the United States by conducting Google searches and based on our knowledge of well-known queer

archival institutions. We emailed all institutions in the list describing our project and calling for participants. Respondents were asked to complete a demographic survey and schedule a semi-structured interview. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Our interview protocol was divided into five segments:

1. An introduction to the archive
2. *The impact of the participants' identity to their work in an LGBTQIA+ archive*
3. Archival policies for collection development
4. Accessioning and deaccessioning practices
5. Uses of their LGBTQIA+ archive
6. Advice for creating an LGBTQIA+ archive
7. Closing questions and debriefing.

The second segment contained the questions specific to archivists' affective experiences:

1. *What thoughts and feelings did you experience when processing materials related to the AIDS epidemic?*
2. *How did you handle those thoughts and feelings? For instance, did you go to therapy, talk to someone, or felt at least the need to do so, or took a break from work?*

We analysed our interviews using an inductive and deductive approach divided into two phases (Charmaz, 2006). In the first phase, the three authors used conceptual codes drawing from their respective disciplines of information curation and social memory (first author), queer media archives and digital curation (second author), and information access and ethics (third author). In the second phase, the first author and their graduate student assistant drew from in vivo, process, and descriptive codes. We inferred codes from the data itself. In the second phase, we used axial coding to weave our codes into a consistent narrative of our data (Kelle, 2007). We also drew concept maps (Miles et al., 2014) to visualize the relationships between codes. The map served as the basis for the results section. Throughout the coding process, we wrote analytic memos (Emerson R. M., 2011; Lempert, 2007) to derive and interpret our findings and draw our conclusions. These memos served as the foundation for the present report.

Results

25 people from across 22 archival institutions participated in this project. At the time of this writing, we have completed the analysis of the first 10 interviews in our dataset. Though all our participants worked in institutions devoted to documenting the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people, not all of them were members of this community. Seven identified as queer, two as straight, and one chose not to disclose their sexual orientation. All participants expressed at least one emotion about their archival work. These emotions ranged broadly, from sadness and exhaustion to a sense of fulfilment.

Sensations

Some of the terms expressed by our participants to describe their emotions referred more to physical sensations, such as feeling 'drained' (P5) and 'heavy' (P10). When asked about the thoughts and feelings they experienced while documenting the HIV/AIDS epidemic, P5 noticed that:

I have to make sure that I am not getting overly invested in my work sometimes because it is emotionally draining. Just because a lot of it is just a lot of tragedy. So, trying to balance that is something that I definitely find different (P05).

P05's remark that 'it is just a lot of tragedy' has two meanings: first, that the epidemic impacted a heavier burden on the LGBTQIA+ community than the rest of the community. Second, that P05, in their role as an archivist, had to engage very closely, for long periods, with multiple materials related to the epidemic, including personal diaries, photographs, and other records of people who

were infected with and die from the virus. This closeness and repeated exposure to such information had a draining effect on P05.

Thoughts

Another participant, P02, referred to their experience not with a specific word but with a reflection on the impact of the epidemic on the LGBTQIA+ community. They recalled the conversations he had with his friends during the 1990s when they met regularly at a gay bar after work:

hearing some of the stories and thinking about like, the one person's dad who died alone in a small town, and, you know, there I'd had done some work in like the late 90s in the, in the Iron Range, and there was one couple and one partner had AIDS and the community and 100 like, rallied around any medical issues or anything like that. They've just rallied around and so thinking about, you know, what, what does that say about this particular person's family? You know, they're in terms of just isolation like, I think that was the biggest thing I thought about is like, how different it is just in certain camps (P02).

P02's experience with epidemic-related records made him reflect upon how the epidemic had a magnifying effect on the isolation that many LGBTQIA+ individuals already experienced (Audet et al., 2013; Emlet, 2006). Importantly, P02 experience during the 1990s allowed them to appreciate the concrete actions of fellow community members to show solidarity with those infected, thereby mitigating the impact of social isolation on those living with the virus.

Negative feelings

Two participants reported challenging feelings, such as sadness and grief (P04, P05) and 'unprocessed trauma' (P09). For P04 and P05, this emotional challenge stemmed from the taxing nature of archiving the epidemic, whereas for P09, the challenge stemmed from the limited resources to support donors:

the other thing too, I would say about queer collecting is there's a lot of unprocessed trauma. And we found out, maybe a little too late, that we needed to be able to offer some of our older donors' access to psychological services. And that's one of the, I guess that would be technically volunteer, we have a group of therapists who will volunteer with us in case we have a donor that is having a real difficult time processing. There's a lot of unprocessed trauma, especially around HIV, a lot of guilt. That's been hard too, it really has (P09).

P09's experience highlights how archivists' emotional challenges are linked to handling records with difficult stories and to their personal connections to trauma survivors. In this sense, P09's claim that 'it's been really hard' refers as much to himself as to patrons', therefore highlighting the caring nature of the archival profession (Agostinho, 2019). It appears that archivists experience duress when they perceive that they are unable to their caring duties towards patrons, which in this case is due to limited resources.

Positive feelings

In addition to these challenging feelings, whether experienced by our participants personally or noticed in their donors, some archivists also reported positive feelings, such as confidence (P01), empathy (P02), pride (P04), awe (P08), joy (P09) and fulfilment (P10). These feelings coexisted with the challenging ones mentioned earlier as can be seen in P10's case. P10 described themselves as belonging to an 'in-between' generation, meaning that they could remember the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the second half of the 1990s. In that sense, they noticed feeling 'heavy' when processing epidemic-related materials. Nonetheless, they also felt fulfilled:

I guess, like, doing the work is both sort of exhausting and taxing and hard, but it's also fulfilling. And so, it's like you get energy from doing it, it also saps your energy. And so, I don't know. It's sort of a balance. You come back to things, and the break helps you to be able to continue on. Certainly, seeing the results of the work, whether that's some scholar has published an article and they used our archives, and I can just be so proud of the fact that I personally was able to help them and that we had these materials (P10).

P10's remark is important because it evinces a complex emotional experience where the challenging and rewarding aspects of their emotional experience exist in a relationship with each other. While acknowledging that processing epidemic-related records takes a toll, P10 also notices that undertaking this work has a positive social impact. As P10, notices that others use the records they have processed, P10 finds that their documentation efforts have a positive impact. To P10, this impact provides an emotional reward that makes their work worthwhile.

Discussion

The emerging patterns in our data analysis suggest that archivists who documented the HIV/AIDS epidemic experienced a physical toll, reflected upon the impact of the epidemic on the LBTQIA+ community, and felt a range of negative and positive affects. The physical sensations of heaviness and drain are more closely connected to stress than relaxation. This suggests a closer connection to negative affects, even if archivists did not explicitly name these using feeling words. In this sense, our findings mirror what prior studies about affect and archives have already shown: archivists documenting trauma and crises do experience their work as a burden (Laurent & Hart, 2021). However, our preliminary findings also reveal that such documentation may allow archivists to experience positive affect. Examples of these are witnessing the positive impact of solidarity among community members, which to some degree mitigates the isolation experienced by those living with HIV/AIDS and realizing the social relevance of the documentation being produced.

It appears that negative and positive feelings exist in tandem, informing each other. P10's remarks suggest that at least some participants found not just solace, but motivation to continue with their work when they perceived that the archival records they produced were embraced by others. Furthermore, positive feelings such as P04's, P08's, and P10's may indicate that archivists have positive associations with their documentation work. In particular, P10's experience tentatively suggests that these positive associations assist archivists navigate the burdensome aspects of their labor. Thus, documenting trauma and crises may not only be a source of burnout to archivists but also provide some degree of reward. This has practical implications for those engaged in trauma-informed archival practice (Laurent & Hart, 2021; Laurent & Wright, 2020; Sexton, 2025). Future interventions in this discipline can help archivists promote and appreciate community solidarity and the positive social impact of the documentation work in addition to the strategies already in place for mitigating the risks of trauma and alleviating its effects (Crisis & Disaster Working Group, 2023). Based on our results, we believe this strategy holds the potential to increase the subjective well-being of archivists who document trauma and crises.

Archivists need not only to receive resources that help them better assist victims but also resources to support themselves in this task, both physically and emotionally. Such resources can help archivists reduce the impact of negative affects and accrue the benefits of positive ones.

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