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A comparison of two methods for studying emotional responses to archival work: Remote interviews and diaries

Wendy Duff, Jessica Ho, Connor White, Christa Sato, Cheryl Regehr, and Henria Aton

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Abstract

Introduction. This paper reports on the use of two research methods to gather data from archivists on their emotional responses to archives and to document the experiences and emotions of archivists. It also draws on comments from the eight archivists who participated in both studies.

Method. The research involved semi-structured, hour-long virtual interviews; solicited diaries; and monthly check-ins and exit interviews with diary-keepers.

Analysis. The research team read, analysed, and coded the diary and interview data, as well as the notes from the check-in and exit interviews. We subjected the data to line-by-line analysis and coding. Emerging themes and patterns were identified and categorized, and interrelationships were then determined in an iterative and reflexive manner.

Results. The study identified four major distinctions between the two methods. First, the interviews provided deeper insights into significant events, while diaries reflected day-to-day documentation of micro-events and emotions. Second, the interview script focused on negative emotions, whereas diaries captured a broader range of emotions. Third, interviews provided a more distant temporal perspective on past events, while diaries were time-dependent,. Finally, power different imbalances were inherent within each methodological approach.

Conclusion. The use of different methods provided different insights into the emotional responses to archives and their causes as well as creating a different experience for the interviewees and diary-keepers.

Introduction

Traditionally, archival theory asserted that to protect the evidential value of archival records, archivists must take a neutral, objective perspective when appraising, processing, preserving, and providing access to records (Lapin, 2022). Over the last decade, however, archival academics and practitioners have urged the profession to reject the myth of neutrality and acknowledge the affective power of archives (Cifor & Gilliland, 2016; Gilliland, 2014). Ricardo Punzalan (2009) suggests that as *co-witnesses* to the lives and stories they archive, archivists have the potential to be deeply affected by records, especially those containing emotionally challenging or sensitive accounts of human suffering. Similarly, Fiona Murphy (2011) observes that, while archival records are primarily perceived as storehouses of memory, they are also repositories of 'trauma and pain … sorrow and loss for many, where unpacified ghosts with unfinished business await' (p. 491).

In recent years, the call to 'take emotions seriously' (Caswell, 2020, p. 153) and to establish policies and practices that support archivists and researchers who are emotionally impacted by archival work have intensified (Regehr et al., 2022; Sloan et al., 2019; Wright & Laurent, 2021). However, when we began our research in 2020, the findings of only two studies on the emotional impact of archival work had been published (Mas & Gagnon-Arguin, 2010; Sloan et al., 2019). In 2019, Douglas, Alisauskas, and Mordell also discussed the concept of *grief work* and explored how this perspective is linked to the creation, organisation, use, and preservation of records.

This paper explores the use of remote interviews and solicited diaries as two data collection methods to better understand the advantages and limitations of each method for studying the emotional responses to archival work, such as feelings of anger, irritation, anxiety, sadness, happiness, or joy. It reports on the findings from two Canadian studies that explored the emotional impact of archival work; one study conducted twenty-one semi-structured interviews (Regehr et al., 2023) and another documented the experiences and emotions of fifteen diary-keepers over a four-month period (Regehr et al., 2023).

In both studies, we sought to understand the nature and factors associated with emotions and archival work when: a) processing and appraising potentially traumatic records (Regehr et al., 2022), b) supporting researchers studying difficult histories (Duff et al, 2024; Regehr et al., 2022), and c) interacting with individuals grieving lost loved ones (Douglas & Alisauskas, 2021; Regehr et al., 2022). We anticipated that semi-structured interviews would offer deep insight into why archivists respond to records in certain ways; how emotionally charged records or interactions with users and donors impact archival staff; which circumstances increase the likelihood of emotional challenges; and how archivists manage such emotions both personally and professionally. We had hoped that the diaries would capture archivists' emotions and experiences with specific records, as well as relevant aspects of their work, in greater detail than the interviews. Although the two studies were distinct, they were conceptually related.

This paper also draws on data from monthly check-in sessions and exit interviews conducted as part of the solicited diary study. It analyses diary and interview data collected from eight archivists who participated in both investigations. The paper outlines the methods used in both studies, compares the data obtained from interviews and solicited diaries, reports on feedback provided by participants, and reflects on the value of these methods for studying emotional responses to archival work. Finally, we examine how the power imbalance between the research team, interviewees, and diary-keepers may have influenced the research.

Research context

We conducted the interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic from 7 June 2021 to 15 November 2021 when many archivists worked from home. The first diary entry was recorded on 17 May 2022, and the last one was made on 2 February 2023. By this time, most archivists had returned to working onsite for at least part of their work week. We acknowledge that COVID-19 may have

impacted the interviewees' mood, experiences, and mental health, as well as our own. Furthermore, during this time, mainstream media began reporting on the unmarked graves of Canada's Indigenous children who were forced to attend residential schools. The identification of the graves of Indigenous children highlights the impact of colonialism and the atrocities enabled by Canadian and religious institutions through genocidal policies enacted in residential schools. These and other significant historical events unfolding during the research project, such as the global rise in anti-Asian violence and the overturning of Roe v Wade in the United States, may also have affected the experiences and emotions documented in the diaries and the interviews.

Archival work

Over the last two decades, archives have increasingly sought to 'document atrocities and build collections that facilitate inquiry into events for reasons that range from legal redress, reconciliation and healing, scholarly research, pedagogical use, and activities of remembrance and commemoration' (Nathan et al., 2015, p. 94). Archiving potentially traumatising records is a productive and important endeavour that is vital for maintaining our collective history (Sexton, 2019). As archivists assess the historical value of donations or arrange and describe records, they often scan, read, view, or listen to their content. Repeated exposure to potentially traumatising records can have an emotional impact on archivists. 'Records that document grief demand a certain affective urgency from those who bear witness to their evidence' (Arroyo-Ramírez, 2022, p. 7). Researchers who access these records can also be emotionally impacted by them (Carby, 2021; McCallum, 2018; McCracken & Hogan-Stacey, 2023). Supporting researchers accessing records of human suffering or donors grieving lost loved ones can also emotionally impact archivists (Douglas & Alisauskas, 2021; Douglas et al. 2022; Duff et al., 2024; Regehr et al., 2022; Regehr et al., 2023).

Definitions

Difficult records refer to records that document human suffering, such as those detailing human rights abuses, residential school records, sexual abuse, major accidents, and racism.

An *Event* refers to a positive or negative experience that triggers an emotional reaction. For example, in this study, an event that resulted in negative emotions (feelings of anger, irritation, and anxiety) was being accused by a colleague of political manoeuvring or manipulation. An event linked to positive emotions (happiness, enthusiasm, and optimism) was successfully transferring documents from a donor's hard drive to the archival system. Some events, however, can trigger both negative (sadness, confusion), and positive emotions (pride), as discussed below.

Solicited diaries are diaries intentionally created for research purposes. In solicited diary studies, diary-keepers are asked to make entries over a set period, reporting on their experiences and interpretations of events related to a specific research topic (Cao & Henderson, 2021). Solicited diaries range from structured, where diary-keepers are instructed to record information at predetermined times or after experiences, to unstructured, which can result in open-ended narratives.

Potentially traumatic records refer to records that could conceivably cause trauma. Sloan et al. (2019) note that seemingly innocuous records can evoke a traumatic response, or alternatively, a response that is 'unsettling, not necessarily traumatic'.

The term *traumatic potentiality* was introduced by Anna Sexton in 2019. She states that records with traumatic potentiality are

> not necessarily traumatic in and of themselves but carried the potential to be traumatic. What may appear to be a relatively benign record for one individual may be a traumatic record for someone else as traumatic potentiality is heightened or lessened depending on

the individual's connection to the experience/event documented by the record. (Sexton, 2025, p. 3)

Literature review

Emotional impact of archival work

Though research that investigates the emotional impact of archival work is limited, findings from extant studies indicate that many archivists experience strong emotional responses to their work. (Bannell & Sexton, 2024; Douglas et al., 2022; Duff et al., 2024; Mas & Gagnon-Arguin, 2010; Regehr et al., 2022; Regehr et al., 2023; Sloan et al., 2019; Wright & Laurent, 2023). Recent literature foregrounds the emotional toll of arranging and describing records of human suffering and atrocities (Mas & Gagnon-Arguin, 2010; Regehr et al., 2022; Sloan et al., 2019), as well as supporting users studying difficult histories, or grieving families who donate records of lost loved ones (Douglas et al., 2022; Duff et al., 2024; Regehr et al., 2022). Sloan et al. (2019) and Regehr et al. (2022) delineate the numerous emotions and experiences associated with working with potentially traumatic records, including nightmares, headaches, disrupted sleep, sleeplessness, excessive sleeping, and feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, irritability, shock, anxiety, loneliness, sadness, guilt, shame, depression, and burnout.

These studies also reveal that many archivists feel unprepared for the emotional aspects of their work. Research highlights a lack of educational and professional resources to prepare archivists for this work, as well as limited institutional support for those emotionally impacted by archival tasks (Regehr et al., 2022; Sloan et al., 2019).

For instance, in a study of Canadian archivists conducted by Sloan et al. (2019), only 11% of respondents indicated that their employer had addressed secondary trauma, which is defined as 'the natural consequent behaviors and emotions from knowing about a traumatic event…[and] from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person' (Figley, 1995, p. 7). Furthermore, an international study conducted by Laurent and Wright (2023) reported that only 34% of respondents had been exposed to concepts of trauma through professional development or training opportunities.

Archivists employ a range of strategies to manage the emotional impact of archival work, including temporal distancing (e.g., switching tasks or taking breaks more often), setting boundaries between work and home, and cognitively distancing themselves from their work. Moreover, a recent study on the emotional impact of collecting material to document COVID-19 suggests that peer and institutional support are the most significant factors in mitigating the harmful effects of this emotional work (Bannell & Sexton, 2024).

Solicited diary studies

Diary studies are an underutilised method for qualitative research in the social sciences. Qualitative research often calls for solicited diaries constructed by participants, or diary-keepers, who record specific types of information or answer questions as opposed to studies of archival diaries (for example, see Allport, 1942; Thomas and Znaniecki, 1927) in which research is conducted on unsolicited, pre-existing diaries. Bolger et al. (2003) state that the design of solicited diaries allows diary-keepers to report on experiences at regular, pre-determined times (interval-contingent), at a time determined by a signalling device (signal-contingent), or based on the occurrence of a pre-determined incident (event-contingent). Solicited diaries capture data from diary-keepers in situ. This allows for more spontaneous, immediate, and naturally contextualised data gathering compared to traditional, retrospective research methods (Hyers, 2018; Reis, 1994). However, the process of keeping a diary can affect the diary-keeper's behaviour (Baker, 2021; Coa, 2021).

The diary method has the potential to capture unique insights otherwise unavailable in other research methods. Each diary entry 'is sedimented into a particular moment in time: they do not emerge "all at once" as reflections on the past, but day by day strive to record an ever-changing present' (Plummer, 2001, pp. 17-18). Thus, solicited diaries are an excellent means to study subjective experiences, emotions, and affect in their everyday contexts. In organisational behaviour scholarship, diary studies are used to study subjective experiences, emotions, affect, and other transient workplace phenomena that would otherwise, and over time, be overlooked or become susceptible to biased retrospective reporting (Beal, 2011; Fisher & To, 2012). Solicited diary methodology has been used in affective examinations of labour relations (Holman, 2016; Poppleton et al., 2008; Tschan et al., 2005), workplace bullying (Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2022), work-related stress (Bono et al., 2007; Clarkson & Hodgkinson, 2007; Sonnentag et al., 2008), higher education (Cao & Henderson, 2021), emotional exhaustion (Portoghese et al., 2017), and unfair events (Barclay & Kiefer, 2019; Matta et al., 2014). Solicited qualitative diary studies have also been used to study information behaviours of archives and library users (Colosimo & Badia, 2021; Duff, 2005; Duff et al., 2012; Kuhlthau, 1991; Melssen 2012; Toms & Duff, 2002), and emotional labour in library staff (Matteson et al., 2015).

The diary-interview method, which includes an interview at the end of the diary-keeping process, can further reflexivity. Zimmerman and Wieder's (1977) initial conceptualisation of the diary-interview method defined diaries as annotated chronological records, commissioned by the investigator, maintained over a specified period and according to a set of instructions. These diaries are 'an observational log maintained by subjects which can then be used as a basis for intensive interviewing' (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977, p. 481). These were 'seemingly employed in a "police-like" fashion, designed to explore any inconsistencies in the "witness statement" (the diary), to check to see whether the diarist was in fact telling "the truth"' (Spowart & Nairn, 2014, p. 329). The use of interviews to ascertain the reliability of diary accounts is fundamentally incompatible with the study of subjective experiences and emotions. Spowart and Nairn (2014), in their study of emotions experienced by snowboarding mothers, assert that diary-interview studies can enable reflexivity in both the researcher and participant about the constitution of subjectivity when data variation is inevitable and valuable. Participants are given the opportunity to engage in reflexive awareness when writing and speaking about their emotions (Spowart & Nairn, 2014). A more complete view of the participant likely emerges from a slower-placed and reflexive research method (Bartlett, 2012). Furthermore, regular or follow-up interviews can serve the practical purposes of adding additional context and micro-level details to diary entries (Toms & Duff, 2002), as well as ensuring clarity of instructions and building rapport (Filep et al., 2018; Toms & Duff, 2002).

The challenges of diary methodology's design, implementation, and analysis are also well-documented. The constructed nature of the diary study results in a product determined by both the diary-keeper and researcher through the diary's design and content analysis (Spowart & Nairn, 2014).

Returning to reflexivity, the 'solicited written diary is trustworthy when the researcher is reflexive of how their status and identity can influence diarist interactions with the instrument as well as their contents within it' (Gawley, 2018, p. 8). Careful consideration should be taken to ensure rigour, reliability, and reflexivity when constructing a diary study. Filep et al. (2018) systematically evaluated forty-three research diary studies in the human geography, health sciences, education field and coded for twelve strategies used by researchers to ensure academic rigour. The strategies are categorised as conceptual framing; methodological reasoning; positionality and reflexivity; and the co-construction and re-presentation of meaning. Herron et al. (2019) argue that the features of diary methods that reinforce rigour can also enhance the ethical dimensions of the study by developing trust, respect, and reciprocity through regular interaction with participants, reflexive practice, and follow-up interviews. The resulting relationships and relational ethic 'recognizes and

values mutual respect and dignity by enabling participants to make choices and control diary content and pacing' (Herron et al., 2019, p. 1006).

Diary-keeping has the potential to be a positive experience for participants. Though diary studies are touted for reducing the likelihood of retrospection and memory lapses by minimising elapsed time between experience and account of the experience (Bolger et al., 2003), retrospection, reflection, and disclosure may be beneficial to participants. Writing in diaries has been found to reduce anxiety (Thomassin et al., 2012) and reported to be cathartic (Clarkson & Hodgkinson, 2007). Expressive writing about past negative experiences has also been linked to positive outcomes in cognitive function (DiMenichi et al., 2019; DiMenichi & Richmond, 2015; Klein & Boals, 2001), and in mental and physical health (Pennebaker & Chung, 2007). Felsher et al. (2018) found that diary participation by transactional sex workers resulted in increased self-awareness about feelings and behaviours, opportunity to demonstrate expertise, and ultimately improved the overall mental health of the participants.

However, this optimism should be balanced with the recognition of the diary study's potential to harm, particularly when the study poses a research question that necessitates participants to revisit and document difficult emotions and affective states. Participants should be involved throughout the research project, including making decisions about the publication of their data (Spowart & Nairn, 2014). The act of diary-keeping itself may add to the emotional stress of a participant or may feel invasive (Meth, 2003; Spowart & Nairn, 2014). Hyers and Walmer (2021) note that when a diary study concludes, participants may experience a sense of loss or disconnection to the researchers and that a 'concluding research group meeting to express gratitude and engage in some collective reflexivity can help provide closure' (p. 192).

Interview literature

Interviews are an effective method for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Fontana and Frey, 2000). In the simplest terms, Kvale (1996) and Adhabi and Anozie (2017) define interviews as a discussion between two or more parties with the express purpose of gathering information about the world of the interviewee to meet the research interests of the interviewer. As such, the interview has become a method of contemporary and interactive storytelling (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). Interviewing, Grant McCracken (1988) writes, 'can take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world' (p. 9).

The interactive nature of interviews stems from evolving research paradigms based on anthropological and sociological developments of the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, thus establishing interviews as an integral and reputable tool of qualitative data collection (Adhabi and & Anozie, 2017; Edwards & Holland, 2013). Interviewing has become a key factor of research design (Kvale, 1996; Weiss, 1994) and its prevalence in society as a tool of data collection has led some scholars to claim that we currently live in an 'interview society' (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997, p. 305). Interview data can help trace 'how personal histories, and social relations interact with affective patterns' (Burford, 2021, p. 163). Wettergren (2015), however, suggests that enquiring about 'emotions tend to put the interviewee on guard' (p.115) and one-off interviews 'prevents researchers from gathering longitudinal personal insights' (Burford, 2021, p. 163).

Face-to-face interviews, in which all parties are in the same physical space, are the traditional, and often preferred approach (Ïackle et al., 2006). Researchers, however, draw on a variety of media when conducting interviews, including email, telephones, messaging apps, Skype, and video conferencing or online meeting platforms. Many scholars have highlighted the methodological limitations of virtual interviews including a lack of visual cues (Irvine et al., 2013), difficulty in reading body language and facial expressions (Dodds & Hess, 2020), and poor internet connections

or other technical limitations (Sy et al., 2020). These limitations create obstacles to building rapport and interpreting silences (Chiumento et al., 2018). Sy et al. (2020) suggest that sharing information, being responsive, and acknowledging the value of information shared by participants can help build rapport in an online environment. Having a second interviewer or assistant present during the interview can also help with the flow of information and the building of rapport (Roberts et al, 2021).

Confidentiality concerns may also arise if researchers intrude into the participants' homes or in places where interviewees can be overheard (Lobe et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021; Sy et al., 2020). Using headphones and virtual background can help to mitigate some privacy concerns (Roberts et al., 2021). Flannery et al. (2023), however, suggest that when conducting interviews from home, researchers can experience increase stress levels and anxieties due to household noises as well as 'a loss of time and space to transition from the "work" self to the "home" self which previously occurred for workers on the commute' (p. 2).

On the other hand, since the COVID-19 pandemic, many researchers have highlighted the numerous advantages that virtual interviewing can provide, especially when using video-conferencing software. Benefits of virtual interviewing include the elimination of travel costs (Irvine et al., 2013; Keen et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021), increased accessibility for individuals with limited mobility, and greater international reach (Abedi, 2024; Keen et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021). Some researchers suggest that virtual interviewing reduces the power dynamics present in traditional interviews (Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). Email interviewing allows the interviewees to reply to questions at their own pace and at a time that is convenient for them (Linabary & Hamel, 2017). Virtual interviewing allows for greater privacy if participants turn off their cameras (O'Quinn et al., 2024). Furthermore, greater anonymity may make participants more comfortable discussing sensitive topics (O'Quinn et al., 2024; Thunberg & Arnell 2021). Marnie Howlett (2022) also suggests that virtual interviewing methods 'actually enabled a more symmetrical relationship' with their participants because they had greater agency and power in their exchanges (p. 39). Lobe et al. (2022) concur, noting that participants have greater agency because they can end the interview at any time.

Research team

The team that conducted the research included a professor of archival science, a professor of social work, a doctoral student in social work who was an experienced clinician, a doctoral student in archival science who was an experienced archivist, and two master's students in an archives program.

Methods

The research involved semi-structured hour-long virtual interviews and solicited diaries.

The interview study

We used a semi-structured script (Appendix A) to facilitate discussions using the long-interview method of data collection (McCracken, 2012). We grouped the interview script into three sections:

- **Section A** Interviewees were asked to describe the records with which they predominantly worked, and their emotional responses related to that work.
- **Section B** Interviewees were asked to focus on experiences and emotions connected to supporting researchers seeking information in the archives.
- **Section C** Interviewees were asked to discuss their experiences and emotions related to interacting with donors of records.

We used the script as a guide and often probed more deeply, asking in-depth questions based on the interviewees' responses. Prior to the interview, we shared the interview script and a consent

form with the interviewees. Twenty of the interviewees worked in Canadian archives, and one worked in an archives in the United States. All but one interview was conducted in English; the remaining interview was conducted predominantly in French, with some discussion in English.

The two doctoral students conducted the interviews. To establish rapport and build trust, each interview began with the interviewers describing their background, explaining their positionality, and discussing their doctoral research (Roberts et al, 2021). The interviewers also invited interviewees to describe their backgrounds. The interviewers took turns asking questions and checking in with the interviewees to ensure that the interviewees were comfortable with continuing.

We conducted the interviews from 7 June 2021 to 15 November 2021. At the request of the interviewees, we did not audio-record two interviews; instead, we took extensive notes, which we shared with the interviewees for their approval. We then coded these notes to identify themes. We transcribed the remaining nineteen audio-recorded interviews verbatim. Two members of the research team analysed and coded the transcripts.

Sometimes the interviews included accounts of highly emotional events, which can impact interviewers and interviewees (deMarrais & Tisdale, 2002). After each interview, the interviewers met to debrief and check in with each other. Throughout the process, the research team endeavoured to support the interviewees and each other. Before publishing any articles based on the research, we shared copies of the articles with participants to ensure they agreed with our interpretation of their contributions and to obtain their permission to use their thoughts and words (Spowart & Nairn, 2014).

The solicited diary

Fifteen archivists volunteered to keep diaries for four months. Fourteen of the diary-keepers worked in Canada, and one lived in the United States. While the instructions in the diary form were in English, one person wrote in French. Prior to completing their first entry, we offered onboarding sessions to explain the diary procedure and answer questions. Diary-keepers signed an informed consent, demographic, and honorarium form prior to the onboarding session. For diary-keepers who had not participated in the interview study, the researchers began the onboarding sessions by describing their background, positionality, and professional experience. During these sessions the research team reviewed the diary procedures, answered questions, and asked the participants about their preferred diary format. We suggested that they could keep an audio-diary, use the online form we provided, or submit handwritten or digital narratives.

The research team discussed questions and comments raised by diary-keepers during our weekly meetings. These discussions occasionally led to minor changes to our guidelines.

We provided an online form along with detailed instructions (see Appendix B) for keeping the diary. We hoped the form and guidelines would facilitate the recording of information, without unduly constraining the diary-keepers. We suggested that diary-keepers complete a diary entry every day that they had a meaningful emotional response after working with records, supporting researchers, or working with donors. We asked diary-keepers to describe each event, with whom or what they were interacting when the event occurred, the feelings and reactions they experienced, and what reaction they received if they shared information about the event. Additionally, diary-keepers were asked to indicate which of a series of emotions or mood states they experienced (e.g., happiness, enthusiasm, anxiety, anger, irritation, depressed, bored, tired, content), and to rate the intensity of the emotion as not at all (0); a little (1); some (2); or a lot (3). To help us understand how feelings changed over time, diary-keepers were asked to describe their emotions every day they experienced lingering feelings. Only one diary-keeper opted to do this. In addition to the online form, we offered diary-keepers the option of submitting copies of

handwritten notes, audio recordings, drawings, etc. Fourteen diary-keepers opted to use only the online form. One diary-keeper who used the form included only a narrative account of their experience rather than completing the structured elements provided in the form. Another diary-keeper used the online form for all but one entry; they submitted images of a handwritten note related to one event. No one opted to submit an audio recording of their diary entry. Finding the right balance between providing diary forms to reduce the work of writing the diary entries without pressuring the diary-keepers is difficult. All diary-keepers opted to use the form as noted above but we do not know if they found it less work than writing a narrative or submitting an audio file, or if the diary-keepers used the form because it was provided. We wish we had asked them.

During the onboarding and check-in sessions we emphasised that diary-keepers should decide how often to record entries and how much information to include about each event. We stressed that we did not want the diary-keeping process to become cumbersome and interfere with their workload. We shared that some diary-keepers made only one entry a week, while others documented their experiences and related emotions more frequently. We also noted that some diary-keepers provided a narrative account of an event and their emotions outside of the designated sections in the diary. Each diary-keeper was offered a $200 honorarium prior to writing their first diary entry. One diary-keeper could not accept the honorarium as accepting it would breach their institution's policies. The first diary entry was made on 17 May 2022, and the last one was made on 2 February 2023.

We reviewed completed portions of the diaries once a month and offered a monthly check-in session for the diary-keepers. The check-in sessions provided an opportunity for the diary-keepers to ask questions and offer feedback on the diary-keeping process. While we did not audio record the monthly check-ins, we made notes of each meeting. If diary-keepers missed one or two weeks of entries during the diary-keeping period, we asked if they wished to extend their participation for up to two weeks beyond the initial four-month timeframe. Three participants opted to keep their diaries beyond the four-month period. At the end of the diary-keeping process, the two researchers met with the diary-keepers to thank them for their participation, to gain further feedback on the diary process, and to bring closure to the project (Hyers, 2018; Hyers & Walmer, 2021). As with the check-in sessions, we documented the discussion by taking notes instead of audio-recording the session. The eight diary-keepers who also participated in the interview study shared their perspectives on the relative merits of the two data collection methods (Regehr et al., 2023).

Three members of the research team (a professor of social work, a professor of archival science, and a student) read, analysed, and coded the diary and interview data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We subjected both the diary entries and the interview data to line-by-line analysis and coding. We allowed themes to emerge from the data in both studies. The broad themes identified in the interview study included: the nature of disturbing material; interviewees' connections to archival materials, donors, and researchers; archivists' commitment to social justice; and strategies adopted by interviewees to manage the emotional impact of their work. Themes emerging from the diary study included: intra-individual emotional experiences; emotional exchanges in the workplace; the emotional demands of archival work; team and leadership interactions; and organizational influences on emotion.

Within these broad categories of the data, we delineated emerging themes and patterns and identified inter-relationships between the categories in an iterative and reflexive manner (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011).

Recruitment

We distributed invitations to participate in the interview study via the Canadian archival listserv, ARCAN-L, in both French and English. Twenty-one archivists responded to the invitation (Duff, et

al., 2024; Regehr et al., 2022). At the conclusion of the interview, we invited the interviewees to participate in the solicited diary study. Eight interviewees indicated interest in joining the second study. We sent an invitation to participate as diary-keepers, again in both French and English via the Canadian archival listserv, and we recruited seven more diary-keepers.

Demographics

Of the twenty-one archivist interviewees, five identified as male, fifteen as female, and one as non-binary. While most interviewees identified as white or with mixed backgrounds, others self-identified as Indigenous, Métis, Jewish, Japanese, and one as a person of colour. Seven interviewees worked in government archives, five in university archives, six in community archives, one in a religious archives, one in a human rights archives, and one interviewee as a project archivist, processing residential school records.

Four diary-keepers worked with and supported users for more than 50% of their work week, while nine diary-keepers interacted with users for less than 25% of their time. Only one person's position involved working with records less than 25%. All but one of the diary-keepers indicated that less than 25% of their work involved working with donors. This diary-keeper indicated they worked with donors 25%-49% of their time. Other activities occupying the diary-keepers' work week included software development, administration, and grant writing.

Analysis

The fifteen diary-keepers generated 304 entries, of which 159 related to an emotional event. The number of diary entries that each diary-keeper recorded over their four-month period ranged from five entries to sixty-seven entries. There was an average of twenty entries per diary. The amount of information in each entry varied from 395 to 6571 words. There was an average of 3421 words per diary. The amount of data the interviews produced was more uniform, with most interviews lasting approximately an hour and generating between 7017 and 10165 words.

Findings from the interview and solicited diary studies

The two studies revealed the types of archival work that elicit different emotions, the events associated with these emotional responses, and the strategies people used to cope with them. As previously noted, the interviewers asked interviewees to describe the emotional impact of working with records, supporting researchers seeking information, and assisting donors. The interviewers also asked interviewees to reflect on how this work had affected their professional duties and their lives outside of work. Interviewee responses highlighted the impact of working with potentially traumatic records (e.g., records of Indigenous residential schools, Japanese internment, and Holocaust records), and with records created in the regular course of business (e.g., accident records and medical records), which could be very upsetting for some interviewees.

The interviewees were more likely to experience these reactions if the material related to their own life or history, if the relationship between the interviewee and donors or community researchers was significant, or if the records connected to the archivist's own sense of social justice. We concluded that the nature of empathic engagement that archivists have with records, donors, and community researchers contributes to the types of emotional responses experienced. (Regehr et al., 2022)

The diary study provided different insights. Instead of detailing a few experiences and their impact, the study revealed a wider variety of events that triggered a broad range of emotional responses related to archival work. This included emotions a diary-keeper brought to the workplace from personal experiences; emotions linked to interactions with colleagues and managers; emotions arising from working with records, community researchers, and donors; and emotions connected to the nature of the workplace itself. The diaries included numerous descriptions of joyous events. Of these, 50% of events eliciting 'some' or 'a lot of' happiness and enthusiasm were linked to

working with records, users, or donors, while 47% of events eliciting 'some' or 'a lot of' anger or irritation stemmed from interactions with colleagues or supervisors.

Diary-keeping process

Most diary-keepers suggested they found the process of keeping a diary beneficial: '[there's] something nice about processing on your own and in text form' and found the process 'easier' and 'less intensive' compared to interviews because 'writing out the events helped [them] reflect'. The diary format allowed diary-keepers to document fleeting emotions before they faded from memory.

Six diary-keepers commented on the value of reflecting on their work and the emotions connected with their reflections. Not only did they suggest that keeping a diary helped them become more aware of their emotions, but the process often surfaced the triggers linked to their emotional reactions. One person suggested it helped them discuss their emotions although they noted that doing so was not easy. Four diary-keepers suggested the practice was cathartic (Clarkson & Hodgkinson, 2007), helped them think through events, and it revealed the types of interactions that often disturbed them. While most diary-keepers found the diary-keeping process helpful, a few also highlighted difficulties. For example, one shared that, at times, revisiting an event and its associated emotional response was challenging. A diary-keeper who provided a handwritten account of the event noted that at first the experience felt too raw to record into a Google Form. Instead, they wanted to gather their thoughts about what had happened, rationalise it, and write it out in a deliberate and thoughtful way. They did not want to 'make assumptions in the moment'. They also opined that rather than filling in a form, writing by hand felt more personal and provided greater freedom to express their feelings.

Diary form

While most diary-keepers suggested the online form was beneficial and helped them easily document their emotions, a few found the format restricting. As noted above, one diary-keeper opted to write about a particularly upsetting event on paper; another diary-keeper explained that they found the form overwhelming at times; and a third diary-keeper disregarded the form and provided a narrative report of their experiences.

Check-in sessions

Several diary-keepers indicated that they appreciated the monthly conversations with the research team. One participant noted that 'regular check-ins were beneficial to the diary-keepers because discussing their diary-keeping process helped them observe patterns in their responses'. Diary-keepers highlighted various aspects of the check-ins they valued, such as feeling connected to the research, having someone to discuss their diaries with, enjoying a friendly chat, and knowing support was available if needed.

Differences between the two methods

We asked the eight individuals who participated in both the diary study and the interview study to share *their* thoughts and feelings about the two methods during the final session. Some revealed that they liked both experiences and that both have their merits. One participant explained that they enjoyed both methods as each offered different opportunities. They suggested the interview gave them the chance to 'talk about the subject as a whole with people'. The diary process, on the other hand, helped them gain a better understanding of the time they required to get back to a normal state after experiencing a good or bad emotion. This individual experienced an intense emotional reaction to a document which affected them for several days. Keeping a diary provided insight into the impact of their work, informing how they structured vacation time, booked personal days, and adjusted their workload.

Other participants preferred one method over the other. Some archivists liked the retrospective nature of the interviews, which allowed them to 'cover any point in time', instead of being restricted to current events. They suggested interviews also enabled a more detailed and in-depth description of an event while the diary entries were often a brief snapshot. On the other hand, some diary-keepers welcomed the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in their own time, to think more deeply about their experiences, and to document events in text form (Spowart & Nairn, 2014). They also suggested that the diary process was less restrictive and allowed them to share a wider range of experiences than responding to set questions in the interview. Another participant also noted explained that they found the diary-keeping process less intense than being interviewed as it gave them more time to reflect.

A few participants also suggested that keeping the diary was easier than participating in the interviews. A diary-keeper who found the diary process therapeutic highlighted the challenging nature of speaking *about* their emotional experiences. Another archivist suggested that verbally describing emotional experiences and trauma could be 'activating' (Meth, 2003; Spowart & Nairn, 2014). They indicated, however, that 'having the space to structure and write down [one's thoughts] had a different impact,' though they did not elaborate on what the difference was. Similarly, a participant shared that they sometimes felt 'incoherent' during the interview, whereas the diaries provided 'a layer of distance' to engage with emotions over a longer period rather than responding impulsively.

In-depth discussion versus micro-events

As previously noted, the interviewers asked specific questions about emotional responses connected to archival work. The semi-structured nature of the interviews facilitated deeper investigation into some aspects of the emotional responses and clarification on other facets. For example, responding to a question about the type of record that evoked strong responses, an archivist replied,

> Archivist: *That's a really hard question. It's hard for me to just pick one type of record, there's so many that honestly trigger me. It could be a photograph, it could be... We have a lot of diaries and memoirs in our holdings as well, but probably our oral history collections — they're mostly audio recordings — is what elicits the most response from me when listening to those records. Probably because I'm not just hearing the story, but I'm also hearing the emotions that come with the way that the storyteller is articulating their lived experiences. And there's so many cases of just horrible, unjust treatment that they had to go through, so it can be really difficult to listen through on those stories. And even reading the transcript can be quite hard, but I would say listening to it is quite impactful.*
>
> Interviewer: *what does that mean when you get triggered, and what does that look like?*
>
> Archivist: *Yeah, that's a really good question. So triggering, for myself, usually results in feeling flushed, so I guess an increase in blood pressure, intense emotion in my chest. Anger, sadness, can often lead to me crying or choking up, even tearing up. And depending on the situation, it'll either result to me being quite upset for the rest of the day or being able to take 15 minutes... Sort of resettle myself, reground myself and continue on with my work. But most of the time, it's triggering more on the extreme side, so there's a lot of an emotional response that comes through. And as I mentioned earlier with my example, it's often something that I continue to carry with me for a couple of weeks, if not longer. So, it's harder for me to let go of things, so I can be re-triggered if I'm re-remembering that experience even a few days later.*

When we designed the diary study, we hoped the diary entries would document how emotions changed over time. We wanted to capture information about how emotions were carried forward into subsequent days and gain a deeper awareness of how these emotions were processed and

resolved at that moment. In the following quotation, the diary-keeper described emotions connected to reading a government report documenting a racist policy:

> *I felt mostly anger, rage, and an incredible amount of sadness.... I tried to take many deep breaths when reading to keep me calm, where possible. I kept pushing myself to read it further, skimming some parts that were making me particularly angry.*

The next day the diary-keeper noted:

> *My emotional response today was directly related to the strong response I had yesterday. I resumed working on the project but avoided reading the records that were very upsetting. Remembering what I had read was enough to evoke another emotional response a day later.*
>
> *I still feel very angry, sad, irritated, and frustrated. The level of anger has lessened since yesterday but my irritability, sadness, and frustration feels like it increased today. I had little energy and no enthusiasm to complete my work.*

Two days after the event, the diary-keeper described a continuation of the emotion elicited by working with the difficult records: '*I was still feeling a lot of anger, stress, and frustration from the days before. The past two nights I wasn't sleeping well, and it manifested itself into a bad headache that was turning into a migraine*'.

Finally, the diary-keeper explained how interacting with the community member donating records helped resolve the emotions they previously felt: '*My original feelings of anger and frustration towards the losses of the XXX were dissipating as I continued to listen to this survivor's experience, and I began to feel compassion, empathy, and appreciation towards the donor*'. This diary-keeper was the only one who described emotions linked to an earlier event.

In the interview study, the interviewees responded to questions and discussed the type of record (audio recordings) and their attributes that can trigger strong emotions. One archivist participated in both studies but offered different insights into the emotional dimensions of their work in the diary study compared to the interview study.

Multiple emotions

As illustrated in the example above, the diary entries captured the strong negative emotions felt by diary-keepers when working with records, which in this case, documented racist policy. While we acknowledge that such accounts can offer deeper understandings of the day-to-day work experiences and contexts that can evoke negative emotions, when we analysed the data from the diaries, we were surprised that few diary entries contained information about the negative impact of working with records, donors, or users.

Entries that discussed this type of work were more likely to be connected to happiness or joy. For example, 22% of the experiences associated with some or a lot of joy or enthusiasm involved working with donors or users, and 28% of experiences of working with records were connected to feelings of happiness.

However, in putting these findings into context, the differences in using interview versus diary methods offer some insights into the different types of data that were generated. While the interviews provided the space for interviewees to reflect in-depth about their emotional responses to significant events, the accounts predominantly centred on events that elicited negative feelings and reactions. This is not surprising given the focus of the research questions and interview guide. A few participants shared that the interview tended to focus on the negative aspects of archival work, but they also noted that their work also had many positive aspects and emotions associated with it. They pointed out that the interviews did not allow them to elaborate on these feelings or experiences in-depth. These limitations were a result of our interview script which focused more

on experiences that evoked strong negative emotions and was not a limitation of the interview method.

The diaries also provided insight into the complexity of the emotional responses and described a broader range of emotions related to an event. For example, one diary-keeper described different emotions: sadness, confusion, and pride connected to the same event. They wrote,

> *Sadness for the grandfather and grandson, and that these incidents were still causing harm ninety years later. Confusion on how best to respond to the caller, whether or not to acknowledge that pain or simply focus on the research request. Some sense of pride that I am able to help toward addressing these situations, but also hesitation about uncovering painful information or possibly not being able to provide answers. In large part because I was able to answer the caller fairly quickly, I felt a positive sense of competence, and my heavy feelings were mostly alleviated within a couple of hours. I have had similar requests in the past, and most evoke the same reactions.*

While the diary-keeper experienced sadness when supporting a user studying a difficult history, being able to find the necessary information also brought feelings of pride because they were able to help a person seeking answers. Thus, we found we could not always simply classify emotional events described in the diaries as either emotionally positive or negative.

Time-dependent diaries

Since diary-keepers maintained their diaries for only four months, their entries reflected the events that took place during that period. For example, of the 159 diary entries related to emotional events, only seven entries discussed interactions with donors, and only thirteen discussed exchanges with archives users. All events that involved interacting with donors evoked positive emotions, while exchanges with users were also mostly positive. A few entries described negative, but not traumatic, emotions connected to supporting users. For example, one archivist described feeling sad and frustrated because they were not able to help a user, and in the entry discussed above, the archivist felt sadness but also pride for a job well done. In another case, the diary entry described an interaction with an unreasonable, demanding user. This is not to say the diary-keepers never experienced traumatic events connected to their work, but rather that during the four months of our study, most of the difficult events they shared did not relate to working with users or donors.

When comparing temporality in diaries and interviews, diary-keepers focused on day-to-day events in the present, whereas interviews emphasised significant past events, offering a different sense of temporality. Through the interview process, interviewees had opportunities to reflect on the emotional impact of significant events and make meaning of their experiences in dialogue with the interviewers. In contrast, diary-keepers may have been more aware of their immediate emotional responses to events. However, due to the event's immediacy, they may not have had time to reflect deeply on their experiences and their impact

Power dynamics

Another key difference between interviews and diaries as methodological approaches is the power dynamic between participants and researchers.

During the interview, our semi-structured script required our interviewees to discuss emotions related to the impact of working with difficult records, supporting grieving donors, and assisting researchers studying difficult histories. Since researchers determined the interview focus, including questions and prompts, they influenced the scope of information collected. The interviewees were asked to respond to questions and share information about difficult experiences and feelings that may have placed them in a position of vulnerability.

The imbalance remained despite taking steps to reduce power dynamics such as disclosing our relationship to the research, reminding interviewees of their right to decline questions, and sharing research papers before publication.

We provided guidelines and a form that asked diary-keepers to record information about any event, leading to the recording of a broader range of emotional experiences, many linked to workplace dynamics. Although we emphasised that diary-keepers were not required to use the form and could provide as much or as little information as they wished, nearly all of them filled in all the elements on the form. Moreover, the consent form, reviewed with diary-keepers at the beginning of the process, outlined the research purpose. Knowing the purpose of the research may have affected what they chose to record (Spowart & Nairn, 2014). Furthermore, the diary-keeping process may have influenced their behaviour (Baker, 2024; Cao, 2021; Hyers, 2018). Since they participated in a study focused on emotions, fleeting emotions may have been noticed and recorded by the diary-keepers, coded and analysed by the research team, and contributed to our understanding of the emotional impact of archival work.

Results

We compared the data gathered from the two studies and identified four ways they differed:

- the interviews facilitated more in-depth discussions of significant events, whereas the diary format, with its day-to-day reflective recordings, captured micro-events that triggered various emotions;
- the diaries indicated that one event could result in the diary-keepers feeling different emotions, both positive and negative;
- the information documented in the diaries, however, depended on the type of work the diary-keeper was doing and the events they experienced during the four months they kept a diary; not all diaries contained information about difficult emotions resulting from working with donors, users, and records. One diary, for example, described only three events, all which evoked positive emotions.
- Finally, different power dynamics are inherent within each methodological approach.

Conclusion

The use of different methods provided different insights into the emotional responses to archives and their causes as well as creating a different experience for the interviewees and diary-keepers. The interviews provided a deeper understanding of negative emotions connected to working with donors, users, and records. The diaries, on the other hand, provided insight into a broad range of events that create both positive and negative emotions. Although the use of solicited diaries as a research method is understudied compared to interviews and focus groups, our findings are consistent with extant literature that solicited diaries can be a valuable means to study subjective experiences, emotions, and affect in everyday contexts (Baker, 2021; Hyers, 2018; Spowart & Nairn, 2014). Some diary-keepers suggested that keeping a diary was ‘cathartic’, that the process ‘helped them think through events’, and ‘revealed types of interactions that often disturbed them’. We acknowledge, however, that the preference for a particular method might reflect different personality types; some people may be more comfortable writing about events rather than discussing them, while others enjoy being interviewed.

Recommendations

For researchers who conduct similar studies, we would highly recommend that two researchers conduct the interviews and check in with each other after each interview. Not only does this help build rapport between the researchers and interviewee (Roberts et al, 2021), but it also helps the

researchers support each other during the interview and afterwards. Revisiting an event or an emotional response can be difficult. Writing about an experience can feel 'too raw', and processing those experiences alone can be difficult. The monthly check-ins provided opportunities for the diary-keepers to interact with the research team and to discuss and reflect on their experiences and emotions, and gain support if needed. We recommend that any project that uses diaries to study emotions include monthly check-ins.

Declaration of conflicts of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethics approval

Both studies were approved by the Human Subjects Research Ethics Board of University of Toronto.

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About the authors

Wendy Duff holds a PhD from the University of Pittsburgh. She is a professor at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto. She is the principal investigator for a SSHRC-Insight Grant-funded project entitled "Emotional Responses in Archival Work." Recently, she conducted impact studies of the Ontario Jewish Archives, the Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada, and the lack of records on Scottish care-leavers. Her previous research and publications focused on the information-seeking behaviour of archival users, archival access, archival impact social justice. She can be contacted at wendy.duff@utoronto.ca

Jessica Ho is a graduate of the Master of Information program at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information, concentrating in Library and Information Science/Archives and Records Management. Her background in not-for-profit and public service work informs her research interests in just and equitable access, representation and meaningful participation in the realm of GLAMs. She is currently a Library Systems Technician with the Toronto District School Board. She can be contacted at jssc.ho@alumni.utoronto.ca

Connor White is an archivist at the Centre de recherche sur les francophonies canadiennes, University of Ottawa. He has a Master's of Information and Master's of History from the University of Toronto. His research interests include the histories of marginalised and dispossessed communities and their inclusion in modern academic settings. He can be contacted at connor.white@mail.utoronto.ca

Christa Sato BA, BSW, MSW, RSW is a PhD candidate in the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto and a lecturer in the School of Social Work at the University of Northern British Columbia (Northwest Campus). Her PhD research focuses on applying a

decolonial Pinayist (Filipina feminist) lens to explore the ways in which diasporic Filipino/a/x in Canada make meaning of suffering, resistance, and healing from intergenerational trauma impacts. She can be contacted at christa.sato@unbc.ca

Cheryl Regehr is a Professor in the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, with cross-appointments to the Faculty of Law and the Institute for Medical Sciences at University of Toronto; and a Visiting Professor at the National Institutes of Health Research (NIHR) Policy Research Unit in Health and Social Care Workforce at King's College London (UK). She previously served as the Vice-President and Provost for the University of Toronto, Dean of Social Work, and Director of the Crisis Response Team at Pearson International Airport. Her programme of research involves traumatic exposures in the workplace and the impact of stress and trauma on professional decision-making. She can be contacted at cheryl.regehr@utoronto.ca

Henria Aton is a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information. Her research focuses on archives and archival practices in postcolonial and postwar Sri Lanka, where she worked as an archivist for two years. Her work pushes against archival theory in the context of postcolonial South Asia, through the lens of feminist South Asian activism-scholarship. Aton is a research assistant on the SSHRC-Insight Grant-funded project "Emotional Responses in Archival Work" and has extensive experience interviewing individuals, families, and archives professionals about archives of the disappeared and trauma. She holds an MA in South Asian religions from McGill University. They can be contacted at henria.aton@mail.utoronto.ca

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Appendix A: Interview protocol

Pre interview script

Thank you for participating in this study. The aim of this study is to better understand the nature of, and factors associated with the emotional responses of archivists as they work with records with traumatic potentialities, support researchers looking for information in such records, or assist individuals who are donating their records to the archives; 2) to identify the ways in which institutions support or fail to support archivists in their work with such records

Your responses to our questions will help us understand how you have responded to working with records, supporting researchers looking for information or assisted individuals donating records to the archives. It may also help us identify ways archival institutions can better support their staff.

I'd like to reiterate that all of your responses will be kept confidential, and you will not be identified in any reports of the research unless you give us permission to identify you. You may decline to answer any question, and you may withdraw at any time. The interview will take about 45 minutes to an hour. Even after the interview is completed you can contact us if you want to withdraw from the study. We plan to present the first paper based on our findings at a conference in June 2021 after which you will not be able to withdraw from the study.

Before we get started there is some paperwork to take care of.

Do you have any questions?

We are required to obtain your signed consent to participate in the study and to have your interview recorded. I would like to confirm that we have received your signed consent form

> *Pass questionnaire to participant.*
> *Allow time to complete.*

[Interviewer: Before session, record participant ID on consent form]

Thank you. We'll start now.

Start recording

So, we would like you to start by understanding a little about your work.

How long have you work in the archives?

What type of archival work do you do, appraisal, arrangement and description etc.?

Main Interview Script

Section A

This next section asks you to describe the records you predominantly work with and emotional responses you have had working with these records

Probes

With what type of records do you work? E.g., photographs, textual records
Do you have a personal connection to these records (e.g., familial, interest, geographic)?

Could you please describe any emotional responses you have had to records which with you have worked?

In general, do your emotional experiences with archival records affect you outside of work?

Have these responses had an effect on your professional duties?

Section B

This next section asks you to discuss your experience of supporting researchers looking for information in such records,

We would like you to start this section by asking you to describe your experience of supporting researchers looking for information or records.

Probes

Could you please describe the emotional impact of supporting researching looking for information or records?

In general, do your emotional experiences of working with researchers affect you outside of work?

Section C

This next section asks you to discuss your experience of working with donors.

So, we would like you to start this section by asking you to describe your experience of working with donors.

Probes

Could you please describe any emotional response you have had assisting donors.

In general, do your emotional experiences of working with donors affect you outside of work?

Have these responses had an effect on your professional duties?

Section D

This section asks you to discuss your emotional responses

In what way did the emotional responses impact your professional duties or did they affect you outside of work.

Probes
How did you manage any negative emotional responses to your archival work?

Please describe any ways your colleagues support your work with emotionally challenging records, researchers or donors.

Please describe any ways your organization supports your work with emotionally challenging records, researchers or donors.

Concluding Questions
Do you have any final comments about the use of current or archival records you would like to make? Do you have any thoughts on things archives or records organization could do to help you in your activism?

Post-Interview Script
That is the end of the interview.

One last thing. We've found in the past that when we read the transcripts, there are sometimes a few points that we'd like to clarify. Would if be okay if we contacted you again, briefly, to clarify what you've discussed today?

If yes:
How we may contact you?

Thank you again. You have our e-mail addresses should you need to contact us for any reason.

Pause the disc recorder as the participant leaves – but leave it on as long as there's discussion.
Stop Disc

Remove disc from recorder, and break off the write protect tabs. Check that it is labeled.

Appendix B: Emotional responses to archival work
Thank you for agreeing to participate in our study and to keep a diary for four months. This project explores the nature of and factors associated with the emotional responses of archivists as they work with records with traumatic potentialities, support researchers looking for information, or assist individuals who are donating their records to the archives. It also aims to identify the ways in which institutions support or fail to support archivists in their work with such records.

The content of your diary will help us to better understand these factors and the existence and effectiveness of institutional supports. The information we will gather from your diary entries will contribute to recommendations that arise from the study.

We are asking you to maintain a diary (in paper or digitally) documenting your emotional responses to your work for a period of four months. Below is a description to the type of information you could record. A member of our research team will meet with you for approximately 15 minutes each month to answer any questions you may have. Feel free to contact us at any time between meetings. …… [information removed]

Diary
We would like you to make an entry every day that you have a meaningful emotional response after working with records, supporting researchers or working with record donors. If the emotional response lasted for a number of days, please describe how your feelings changed with time and your actions related to this response.

Each diary entry should contain the date you created the entry. The entry should also contain the following information or answer the following information, if relevant.

- Describe the work you were you doing before you experienced the emotional response in enough detail so we can envision the task(s) in which you were involved? Over what length of time were you exposed to the material/researchers or donors? Describe the context for working with these materials, for example repeated viewing of challenging records, working alone or with others, and your general mood before engaging with tasks.
- Describe the nature and intensity of your emotional response. How long did the response last? Was this response related to earlier or similar responses you have had while working at the archives?
- Describe any actions you took to mitigate any negative emotional response or share the experience.
- Describe any ways the emotional response impacted your work.
- Describe any support you received from your manager or the archives.
- Describe any precautions you took to limit the impact of working with emotionally challenging records, supporting researchers or working with donors.
- Discuss any aspects of your work, or your work environment that may have had an impact on your emotional response.
- If you talked to someone please describe the interaction and how the conversation affected your emotional response.
- Any other relevant information.

Completed portions of your diary will be collected once a month.