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IDENTIFYING DECISION BIASES AND CURATORIAL JUDGMENT PATTERNS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAINING IN ARCHIVES

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Abstract

Decisions made in curatorial practices in archival institutions are influenced not only by written standards, but also by implicit cognitive biases and decision-making patterns that could be shaped by the materials themselves. This paper describes the investigation of the occurrence and typology of identified decision biases (confirmation bias, availability heuristic, and cultural framing) embedded in the judgment processes of archival practice. Using a combination of structured interviews, content analysis of accession records, and behavioural audits, the study empirically identifies patterns of recurring judgment in curatorial activity. The researcher proposes the use of a psychological training paradigm to address decision biases by including training on metacognition, decision-mapping activities and reflective practice modules in professional development programs for archivists. In addition, the training modules are described as improving the ethical accountability and the diversity of representation in archives. The implications of the findings are worthwhile to both archival science and applied psychology as a replicable model for recognition and mitigation of bias in other contextual arenas of decision-making with known heritage built-in situations.

Keywords: Decision biases, curatorial judgment, archival science, psychological training, cognitive heuristics, heritage ethics, bias mitigation

INTRODUCTION

Decision-making in archival curation is not at all a mechanical or value-neutral act; it is influenced by a host of cognitive and psychological reasons that affect how things are evaluated, kept, and used. Archivists are not separate from their mental models, institutional pressures, or their sociocultural contexts [5]. Decision biases and curatorial judgment patterns are two constructs that help shape which records will be valued, how they will be categorized, and what stories will be constructed for public use. Decision biases are conditional discrepancies from logical or rational decision-making that stem from the use of mental shortcuts, or heuristics that are often taken during periods of time pressure or under uncertainty; whereas curatorial judgment patterns which, in line with cognitive processes referenced elsewhere, reflect the habitual evaluative systems that archivists use when reviewing and organizing content and formed from personal experience and institutional memory respectively [13]. These cognitive processes can cause many occasional inconsistencies between collections, exclusion of vital voices, or implicit biases that distort the historical record, and if not analyzed, raise issues for the credibility, neutrality, and ethical responsibility of archival institutions.

In archival practice it is critical to recognize and comprehend these biases, as the curator plays an influential role in forming historical documentation and social memory, cultural identity, and educational discourse [2][8]. Curators are the gatekeepers of collective memory, determining whose voice is heard and whose is not. For instance, the confirmation bias (the tendency to look for or interpret information in a way that confirms one's existing beliefs) can allow curators to privilege certain records illustrating a dominant institutional ideology while simultaneously neglecting other more dissenting or subaltern narratives. Appropriate examples of this bias include circumstances where a curator is reliant on the availability heuristic- which causes individuals to make decisions based on accessible, well-known documents, irrespective of their historical merit [14]. Heuristics can result in the neglect of obscure records whose significance may not be immediately relevant or pried from the original unaffiliated creator/campaigner to obtain accessible records on marginalized communities. Post-emerging and "born digital" material, social media documentation, and not conventional narratives included in an archival

collection has complicated representation orthodoxy and made it more likely for biases to misconstrue the historical depiction of records [10][12]. These patterns make it all the more imperative for archivists to reflect upon, identify, and evaluate their own decision-making practices. Without careful reflection and remedial processes or corrective acts- they are in danger of perpetuating omissions in knowledge and erasing communities culturally through their archival activity, which runs contrary to the archivists process of preserving diversification and access [6].

To address these issues, this study will investigate, examine, and resolve the cognitive and behavioral aspects of decision biases and curatorial decision strategies in archival practice [9]. The primary objective could be explained as the proposal of a comprehensive psychological training model to help archivists foster self-awareness, critical reflection, and more ethical/inclusive decision-making. In order to achieve this goal the research will use a mixed-method approach incorporating qualitative interviews, document observation, and cross-institutional comparisons, to expose how biases take shape in both policy and practice [3]. The model of training proposed would require practical interventions including the development of metacognitive skills, bias-detection checklists, and peer-review strategies. The education and training tools will be intended to be usable across archival organizations and iterative for professional development assignments [15]. The study's relationship to archival and applied psychology thinking is that it is positioned within a changing moment toward equity-based heritage management and culturally responsive curation.The study reiterated that recognizing subjectivity is not failure, but merely part of an accountable, reflective archival ecosystem.

OVERVIEW OF DECISION BIASES IN ARCHIVAL WORK

2.1 Confirmation Bias

Confirmation bias is an unconscious predilection to favor information that confirms pre-existing beliefs, assumptions, or expectations, while disregarding information that does not. This kind of bias in the curation of archives and archival material can indirectly influence the ways in which items are commissioned, organized, and preserved. The actions of the archivist are often bound by institutional constructs and historical collecting plans, which position archivists in a situation where they might select documents that reinforce public narratives or strengthen national, political or institutional ideologies [4]. For example, in archives that document colonial histories, the curatorial gaze is more likely to lean toward official state documents, correspondence files (often from royalty), and even missionary records (often of activities on colonized lands) and intentionally ignore documentation of resistance movements, Indigenous perspectives in relation to their land and culture, or recorded histories of subaltern communities whose pasts may be problematic for institutions of power [1]. This situation creates and embodies an imbalance in archives based on charter created from or with particular attention to perspectives of the powerful/culture of power and ultimately lose some degree of collective memory or erase political histories of marginalization. Over time, and if left unchecked, confirmation bias can institutionalize selective remembering and limit the chances to engage critically with the past. Essentially, awareness as a curator and diversification in sourcing archives can provide routes to counteract this cognitive trap.

2.2 Availability Bias

The availability bias refers to the decision making that relies heavily on the most immediate, recent, or memorable information, rather than considering the full breadth of relevance to the decision, or how representative it is against other sources and information. The availability bias exists for archival practice through decision making where either readily available or previously used materials are prioritized amidst other potential materials to be accessed, such as prioritizing hold collections of collections that have been digitized, well promoted, or used in previous projects. Availability bias can result in curators relying excessively on "what is at hand" - such as institutional flagship collections, or legacy donation collections - while not addressing lesser known materials that are more difficult to retrieve, process, or assess. To provide an example, an archival collection of a widely circulated political figure's papers, has received a broad body of research activity, replication, and references, while records created by local instigators or community members together with informal stories by local storytellers, are rendered absent as they don't allow for immediate visibility or structure. Similarly, archivists negotiating specific time or money limitations may come to depend on and select for highest availability materials without further investigation.

2.3 Anchoring Bias

Anchoring bias is the over-reliance upon early assessments or anchors when forming judgments thereafter, even in the face of contradictory, new or alternative evidence. Anchors in the archival context often exist in the earliest phases of the curation lifecycle when negotiating with donors, performing the initial appraisals, and generating metadata. Once an archive designates a collection as "minor," "incomplete," or "supplementary," that decision creates a cognitive anchor that coerces subsequent evaluations, despite a later review of the same collection delineating historic depth or compelling contextual reference. For example, if the introductory notes at the starting point of descriptions for a political collection downplays the relevance of women's correspondence, as examples, then subsequent archivists may miss the embedded feminist historiographic value of the letters. Anchoring has similar effects when curators perform reclassifications or reappraisals, if they sense an obligation to the existing identifiers, or the original described categories. If curators perceive descriptions as fixation and linear, this mindset

limits curatorial agency and organizations to minimize option the integrity of collections, in addition to constraining the new theme-based reorganization of collections or masking possible new interpretations. Ultimately, to mitigate anchoring, archival systems should employ opportunities that facilitate reflective, iterative reviewing practices, peer conversation/daily interactions with varied users, and iterate classification schemas that support evolving collections by rethinking how possibilities of collections exists as new content emerges.

2.4 Impact on Archival Decision-Making

The cumulative effect of cognitive biases—confirmation bias, availability bias, and anchoring bias—challenges the ethical integrity, inclusivity and representational accuracy of archival collections. Cognitive biases influence documentary decisions about what material gets preserved, how that material is described, and, ultimately, what gets emphasized and downplayed. If cognitive biases remain unresolved, they may exacerbate systemic social inequality by elevating certain cultural, political, or scholarly perspectives while diminishing those perspectives that are outside of mainstream recognition, shaping historical truth instead of representing it; consolidating narratives instead of serving diverse stories; or parochially guarding the values that underpin public memory andthem in the way that they could do so [11]. Furthermore, the way in which collections are made open to the public and interpreted by scholars, educators, and policymakers, as well as the general public, compound the societal impact of these decisions. In order to protect the authenticity of archival institutions, archival professional development should include psychological literacy and bias-recognition approaches which archivists can use for self-reflection or appraisal of ethical matters in the archives, as well as collaborative review processes. In the end, a commitment to self-awareness and lifelong learning may help archivists make archives that are more equitable, flexible and publicly responsible [7].

III. Curatorial Judgment Patterns in Archival Work

3.1 Selection Bias

Selection bias within archival curation is systematic favoritism concerning materials, themes, and contributors during appraisal and acquisition processes. Selection bias is often a product of a curator's socio-cultural background, academic training, or institutional obligations. A curator may, for example, be much more likely to select records documenting elite institutions or high-profile individuals for a permanent collection than to select sites of grassroots documentation or oral histories from marginalized groups. This systematic selection bias reduces the overall representation of history and ultimately favors some narratives while erasing others. Culturally, selection bias is significant, as it guarantees that what is saved will shape what will be understood by future generations about the past. Decisions made with selection bias have serious consequences for both ethics and culture.

3.2 Interpretation Bias

Interpretation bias occurs when curators apply subjective meaning to archival materials in the course of classification, annotation, or description. Interpretation bias can stem from the curator's personal value system, disciplinary perspective, or professional belonging. For example, if records are about protest movements and refer to these as "civil unrest" versus "acts of resistance", this shapes the historical context, narration of the past, and the way the public and scholars think about the past. Furthermore, interpretation bias will influence retrieval, use, and understanding of the records when the labels apply to authority of records. With the strength of metadata and cataloging language, it also applies to how historical meaning and epistemological framing occur.

3.3 Presentation Bias

Presentation bias refers to the ways in which curators choose to exhibit or promote archives where they often emphasize some narratives and ignore others. The methods by which curators develop collections and which collections to digitize, emphasize in exhibits, and promote through educational programming has great impact on public participation. For example, archives have been known to highlight, or celebrate, the contributions of well-known national leaders while downplaying, or ignoring altogether, the laboring contributions of marginalized communities or controversial individuals. In this way, they create a curated representation of public memory, despite the historical events being rich with complexity. Thus, presentation bias encompasses not just storage and description, but is an intentional approach to the freshly constructed lives, cultural identity, and collective memory.

3.4 Role of Curatorial Judgment in Shaping Archived Materials

Curatorial judgment should not be seen as a passive or technical activity—it is one of interpretation that is situated in a variety of cultural, institutional, and psychological contexts. Each aspect of archival development—selection, interpretation, presentation—embodies choices that shape how we document the past and the memories that we create.Curatorial judgments that are not interrogated can reproduce existing power relations and cultural blind spots. On the other hand, when curators are trained to recognize and reflect on how their judgment is formed, archives may have greater potential to be inclusive, critical, and democratizing. Therefore, it is very important to understand and improve curatorial judgment in terms of our ethical obligation to stewardship of archival heritage.

METHODS FOR IDENTIFYING DECISION BIASES AND CURATORIAL JUDGMENT PATTERNS

4.1 Data Analysis of Archival Decision-Making Processes

A primary way of revealing decision biases in archives through the archives themselves is by analyzing documented institutional decisions related to appraisal, acquisition and deaccessioning, including curatorial logs, donor agreements, collection development policies, and catalog metadata (I have grouped these documents as

"institutional records" for our analysis). By utilizing qualitative content analysis and coding frameworks, researchers examining institutional records can identify patterns—which may point towards bias as typified by a systematic overage of certain topics, or under-documentation of marginalized individuals or consistently more documentation of certain formats. Additionally, statistical instruments can also be used to describe the degree to which such patterns exist, providing quantitatively demonstrable evidence of how decision biases can be operationalized in the practices of archives.

4.2 Interviews with Archivists and Curators

To understand the cognitive and interpretative dimensions of curatorial behavior, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of archival professionals. Interviews investigated archival professionals' personal philosophies, how people follow their institutions norms, and what they see as roadblocks related to appraisal and representation. Participants were asked about past decisions from various curiosities choosing archival materials. Archival professionals were asked to justify their selections and were encouraged to imagine themselves curatorial archival materials differently to uncover potentially unconscious tendencies to judge. Through thematic analysis of the interview transcripts we observe perceived subjective interpretations and emotional impacts; as well as what archival professionals saw as institutional barriers that may hinder archival behaviour; often in ways that are not observable from a procedural perspective.

4.3 Comparative Analysis of Archival Practices in Different Institutions

The identification of bias can also abound with a comparative perspective that considers how the curatorial choices made by archival institutions differ (e.g., public vs. private, academic vs. government, or regional vs. national). Consideration of curatorial practices using a comparative lens uncovers social, structural, and contextual influences such as what is valued by funders, who the intended beneficiary audience is, their expectations, or what is considered politically acceptable. An example might be if one archive values historical continuity in their practices, while another archive is focused on activism. This practice of valuing could lead to significantly different decisions about what is considered "worthy" to collect and keep. When investigators take a comparative view of selection outputs, exhibit curation, descriptive language across sites, it allows for opportunities to consider what may be based in institutional specific norms, or institutional specific views or judgments.

V. Implications for Psychological Training in Archives

5.1 Importance of Awareness and Recognition of Biases

The first step to ethical and equitable archival practice is to raise awareness of the biases and judgment typologies that influence curatorial practices. Psychological research has demonstrated that, most of the time, individuals are unaware of their biases, especially those bias responses that occur automatically or are bolstered by institutional rules.In the context of archival work, this lack of awareness may mean that archivists may exclude diverse narratives unintentionally, or may impose a dominant cultural framework. As a result, training programs must focus on getting archivists to identify main biases such as confirmation bias, anchoring bias, and selection bias, and how they look in practice in archival contexts. Reflective exercise, case studies, and decision mapping tools, can facilitate this awareness and encourage consideration in the professional self.

5.2 Strategies for Mitigating Biases in Decision-Making

In addition to self-awareness, curators need practical methods to actively address bias in their practice. One way to implement this could be structured decision protocols (which make the criteria for evaluation and subsequent selection explicit, reducing reliance on the curator's subjective intuition). These protocols will make the curator's decisions discriminatory, and thus less susceptible to bias, more evident. Peer-review systems employed within curation teams might also offer an additional perspective and can be applied as corrective tools against individuals own errors of judgement. Additional bias-checklists or even cognitive nudges within digital tools can be a reminder for curators to pause and consider their own writing or other database choices before making those decisions final. They should also be trained to be cognitively metacognitive (thinking about our own thinking) and, also think about changing our thought process from feedback. These additional measures can be implemented on a routine basis to help develop less biased/ assessed equitable archival decisions.

5.3 Integration of Psychological Training into Archival Education Programs

Bias-mitigation strategies must be incorporated into the original training of archivists in order to have a sustainable impact on the archival profession. Graduate programs in archival studies should include dedicated modules for decision psychology, ethical reasoning and cultural awareness training, where students will learn decision-making theory mixed with interactive simulations, scenario-based learning, and group reflection. For mid-career professionals, continuing education workshops can serve as a key point in reinforcing or updating this content relative to changing curatorial environments. Additional implementation avenues include institutional partnerships with psychologists or behavioral scientists that augment the content. The key to moving archival education toward an awareness position that creates accountability while being socially responsive is to substantiate and validate the need for psychological training as a component of archival education.

CONCLUSION

This investigation has examined how biases and curatorial heuristics can impact archival decision-making with consideration of confirmation, availability, anchoring, selection, interpretation, and presentation biases. Using

data analysis, interviews, and inter-institutional analysis, it has become apparent that many of these biases are done subconsciously, but do have a significant impact on the overarching narrative we can preserve and how that narrative is framed. These biases interfere with our archival neutrality, create access barriers to an already underrepresented narrative, and construct a collective memory that can legitimize systemic inequities. We were able to highlight some key findings within the study that demand a stronger awareness of bias within the profession and advocate for the incorporation of psychological frameworks during archival education. The evidence we presented of the archival profession adopting structured decision-making tools, metacognitive strategies, and collaborative reviews showed to hold the greatest promise to overcome these cognitive biases. Furthermore, situating psychological practices in the context of archival studies to equip archivists, or information professionals, with tools to invoke a more deliberative and ethical archival decision-making process will always be valuable.Future research can build upon this work by examining effective bias-mitigation strategies in digital archival environments, investigating the role of AI systems in facilitating or enhancing curator bias, or examining the longitudinal impact of psychological training based interventions on archival actions. Studies of these concepts in different cultural or national contexts could also provide illuminating ongoing considerations on how local epistemologies influence curatorial rationale.Ultimately, this paper is a call to conscious action for archival institutions to maintain critical self-reflexivity and psychological skill acquisition in their practice ensuring that the stories they retain are not just factually accurate, but also diverse, representative and inclusive; actively recognizing archives' role as an equitable custodians of collective memory within a complex and pluralistic future.

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