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TELLING TALES – A PARADIGM FOR RECORDKEEPING RESEARCH (Paper)

Abstract

This paper addresses the need for a paradigm shift in recordkeeping research that meets the needs of social justice agendas. I propose an approach that combines the social ontology of Dorothy Smith's method of inquiry, institutional ethnography, and a storied epistemology as the foundation for a new model for recordkeeping research that blurs boundaries to uncover and tell tales.

1. Introduction

Telling tales – when we are children, we are told not to tell tales, not to be a tattle-tale, not to divulge the secrets of others, not to expose the seamy underbelly of playground machinations with their potential mix of half-truths and narratives designed to accomplish our aims. Telling tales as a conceit and a practice can blur the boundaries between truth and untruth, real and imaginary, spoken and unspoken. Tales can be a troubling and uncertain mix of good and bad. Telling tales can also be the sharing of story, a window to our lived experiences; they can be how we process and communicate with others. Stories can also make things happen. It is from this liminal space of telling tales, of storying, that I suggest a new way of approaching recordkeeping research. A way that subverts the notion that we should not tell tales; a way that gives voice to all involved in the research process, whilst helping us to understand the nature of the record itself.

2. The need for a new paradigm

We know that records have immense power. As inanimate, ephemeral and amorphous 'things', they have the power to story our lives, to confirm (or not) our memory and identity, to create us and our experiences as abstractions that we may or may not have a voice in creating. Whole worlds can be created or upturned by the record and the systems and processes of which it is part. I take this understanding of the record and its ecosystem from the research on Care and the Care-experienced. This research, which speaks of the multitude affects that recordkeeping can have on and for children and their experience of everyday life across time (*Life-Long and Intergenerational Impacts of Abuse | Abuse in Care - Royal Commission of Inquiry*, n.d.), is a catalyst for my consideration of a new recordkeeping research paradigm. Despite the recordkeeping failures observed across child abuse inquiries in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, the focus generally remains on the record as 'object', that is on access, redaction, disposal, content and so on (Evans, 2017; MacNeil et al., 2018; RCIRSA, 2017). This

focus distracts from the need to consider how the record (or lack of record) came to be created in the way that it was and more importantly to what end. We cannot start to understand the way our society is constructed and how we experience the world as we do without considering how these everydays are made possible. Understanding records creation is fundamental to this and helps to explain my use of the term “recordkeeping as a one word description of the processes by which we create, capture, organise and pluralise records,” rather than “record keeping (two words) as a way of referring to the keeping of records as physical objects” (Upward et al., 2013, p. 38). In order to understand the record, we need to “accept exponential expansion, probe chaos and order, look for useful fractals across and within the complexity at different levels, and ... understand that change is generated by unexpected connections within complexity” (Upward et al., 2018, p. 20). A research paradigm that starts with story and that considers “[t]here isn’t any center to the world but a story” (King, 2005, p. 32) provides a flexible and nuanced starting point from which to explore how recordkeeping is complicit in the wicked problems facing society.

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live” (Didion, 2017, p. 11). With this introductory sentence to *The White Album*, Didion reveals our reliance upon story as a way to make sense of the world and our experience(s) of and within it. Sometimes these are stories that are convenient, that paper over a story we would rather not know or that challenge our belief systems, our ontological hold on the world. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we often craft stories that confirm our worldview or that fit the patterns of the stories we have always told. It is rare to pause and question whether these stories align with our realities. With this paper, I propose a way to take this metaphorical moment and explore it within research design and praxis. I outline a paradigmatic step-change for recordkeeping research that responds to the “critical task in both academic research and public discourse to question historical and cultural myths and re-evaluate traditional paradigms” (Cook, 2013, p. 95).

I join with the “interdisciplinary enthusiasm of the last decades [that] has challenged the founding epistemological myths as well as the methodologies of traditional academic disciplines” (Cook, 2013, p. 95) and match that with another novel coupling that combines institutional ethnography’s ontological reliance on the social and a storied epistemology inspired by Thomas King’s *The truth about stories – a native narrative* (2005). I introduce Dorothy Smith’s counter-disciplinary method of inquiry, institutional ethnography (IE) (2005), as a natural fit for recordkeeping research and its present trajectory towards archival activism (Caswell & Cifor, 2016; Evans et al., 2015; Gilliland, 2015; Harris, 2015). I draw especial connection between institutional ethnography’s consideration of text and textual activation as of meta-methodological merit in recordkeeping research and of particular value when challenging a Jenkinsonian conception of the record and evidentiality. Smith contends that “it is important to recognize that facts are constructed in a context of *telling*. The organization that is created aims at this telling and aims therefore at the purposes for which it will be told” (Smith, 1974, p. 258).

IE looks to understand how things come to be the way they are and holds that texts mediate the everyday experience, ultimately making it subject to ruling relations.

At the root of the social justice agendas of much recordkeeping research is the desire to right the many wrongs that our disciplines have been complicit in, to give voice to those silenced (Moss & Thomas, 2021). The critical task of questioning traditional paradigms that Cook speaks of is very much underway. Academics and practitioners are increasingly aware of, and continue to uncover, the shortcomings of the record, the archive and archival practices. This scrutiny has also revealed an (un)knowing complicity with those systems and beliefs that realise those failures of recordkeeping, which is confronting to present-day sensibilities and those who position themselves with social justice agendas.

The combination of Smith's IE and King's storytelling might just be a way to not only identify issues but to explain and understand how these issues come to exist and persist over time and space and crucially to uncover the record's role in that process. Institutional ethnography offers recordkeeping researchers the "activist orientation of the process and product of analysis" (Campbell & Gregor, 2008, p. 6), that is required to tell the tales that need to be told.

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