

Chapter 2

Theories of Appraisal in Archives: From Hillary Jenkinson to Terry Cook's Times

Olefhile Mosweu

University of South Africa, South Africa

Lekoko Sylvester Kenosi

Qatar National Library, Qatar

ABSTRACT

Appraisal is defined as a set of recordkeeping processes involved with determining how long to keep records and what ultimately will become the archival representation for the future. It has been described as the most intellectually demanding, controversial, and debated issue in archival science. This is because there are different opinions regarding how records appraisal should be undertaken and thus no two archivists will approach records appraisal in exactly the same way due to the absence of a perfect formula. The objective of this chapter is to discuss appraisal theories and their applicability in appraisal practice. The thesis of this chapter is that any of the four appraisal methodologies would be able to select the future archive, including a combination of the various appraisal methodologies as it allows one to tap from the strength of each.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter brings to the fore issues, controversies and ideas on how records appraisal should be conducted as alluded to by archives and records management professionals, and commentators. Appraisal is the set of recordkeeping processes involved with determining how long to keep records, and what ultimately will become the archival representation for the future. Appraisal is possibly the most contested of archival functions and the most discussed in the professional literature.

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The thesis of this book chapter is that appraisal of records, being arguably the centre of archival practice, is a difficult undertaking which cannot be successfully achieved by adopting a single appraisal methodology. This chapter acknowledges that each appraisal school of thought can be used to inform appraisal decisions in the selection of the archive. It argues that appraisal practice is influenced by the environment under which it takes place. It therefore, follows that the selection of archival documents cannot be based on a single appraisal methodology. The objectives of this chapter are to; identify the different schools of archival appraisal and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each in the selection of archival documents. Available literature is used to highlight the criticism and appreciation of each of the appraisal methodologies, when selecting archival records; present the nature and goal of each appraisal school. The chapter concludes, in cognizance of the aforementioned, that over and above being informed by the different appraisal schools of thought, it is imperative that the appraiser or the archivist have enough time for research, thinking, consultation and studying.

BACKGROUND

No function is as troubling and as important to archivists as records appraisal (Ngulube 2001; Garaba, 2007; Greene, 2009; Cook, 2011). Greene (2009) avers that since the 1940s, most archivists agree that archival appraisal is their primary function but they do not agree on how it should be done. There is simply no one way of doing it. This is also attested to by scholars such as Stuckey (2004), Kenosi and Moathodi (2012), Thanye, Kalusopa and Bwalya (2015) and Couture (2005), just to mention a few. The Queensland State Archives defines it as “the process of evaluating business activities and records to determine which records need to be captured and how long those records needs to be kept to meet business, accountability requirements and community expectations” (Queensland State Archives, 2010, p. 5). The first activity involves the evaluation of records either for preservation or destruction, the second has to do with the totality of measures taken to ensure long term access. In agreement, IRMT (1999) and the National Archives of UK (TNA) (2004) note that records appraisal involves making decisions on what records need to be kept and for how long in order to enable an organisation to keep utilizing them for operations. Secondly, appraisal is done for purposes of deciding which records have archival value and can be transferred to an archival repository for permanent preservation as archives. This kind of appraisal is often referred to as appraising for enduring value while the former is appraisal for continuing utility (IRMT 1999). Although the second reason for undertaking appraisal as espoused by Queensland State Archives (2010) refers to ensuring access to archival records, in essence it is more or less a similar reason to the one put forward by both IRMT (1999) and TNA (2004), which is the selection of records for permanent preservation. This is because the whole idea of preserving the future archive is to make it accessible (Ngulube, 2001; Forde, 2007; Oweru & Mnjama 2014).

Greene (2003) opines that amongst other archival functions, it is the most intellectually demanding. It is also the most controversial and the most debated issue in the archives and records management profession. There are differences of opinion regarding how records appraisal should be undertaken and thus no two archivists will approach records appraisal in exactly the same way (Bailey, 1997; Stuckey, 2004; Cook, 2011). Appraisal practice is influenced by prevailing circumstances on the ground. For example, the development of appraisal in the United States developed from a situation where there was a lack of standardised approach to organisational record-keeping (Stuckey, 2004) and also due to the independent nature of state archives with the US federal system as well as the unique states’ own factors that influence

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