Introduction

Doing historical research can be illuminating and inspiring, as archives host unique and powerful opportunities for scholarship, activism, teaching and research. This type of work can also be challenging and complex, and present a number of methodological and ethical dilemmas. Historical geographers have written in detail about research practice, with rich accounts of how to source material and undertake archival fieldwork (e.g. Baker 1997; Gagen et al. 2007; Lorimer 2009) and, to a lesser extent, oral histories (Riley and Harvey, 2007). Miles Ogborn (2003) and, later, Ruth Craggs (2016) have provided excellent overviews of archival research, and there is a growing recognition of the increasingly creative engagement of geographers with archives (see also Mills 2013). A range of collections – national, regional, local, institutional, personal and private – offer researchers insights into past lives, places and events across different time periods and international contexts. Crucially, these different types of archives are all gendered in their construction, content and consumption. This chapter engages with these dynamics, focusing on the relationship between gender, politics and ethics in the context of feminist historical research, specifically on archival encounters.

Archives are institutions that collect and preserve written, visual and audio material that can be read as texts with discursive meaning, both in situ during fieldwork and on digital and online platforms. Across all types of institutional or personal archives, source material can be diverse in form, content and style, varying from comprehensive coverage to bit-part chronology. Archival work is fraught with challenges due to the inevitable distance from the 'live' events or lives themselves, the partial truths and memories that the archives house and the political creation and curation of what and who 'counts' as history. The dis/order of archival collections also reveals issues of representation and power connected to wider debates on knowledge, truth and evidence (see Lorimer and Philo 2009; Till 2001). In response to many of these challenges, and to the nature and politics of historical geography more broadly, feminist historical geography emerged as a research agenda and intellectual project in the late 1980s. It continues to grapple with the gendered construction of knowledge and to unearth hidden histories of the lived experience of women across historical periods. As Boyer notes, it:
can entail both seeking out sources which shine light on the social construction of gender and other kinds of power relations in historical contexts, as well as seeking to understand the politics that structure what we can know of past worlds.

Boyer 2004, 170

This chapter introduces this research area. It has an explicit focus on the methodological approaches to archival fieldwork in the spirit of Part 4 of this Handbook: ‘Doing feminist geographies’. Specifically, we focus on methodological approaches by both engaging the literature and reflecting on our own attempts to develop an ethical practice in relation to archival work. The remainder of the chapter is structured in three core sections: first, we introduce feminist historical geography and explain how it has developed distinctive approaches to the gendered politics of the archive; second, we focus on the often-neglected ethical considerations of historical research, supporting the continued development of archival approaches that intersect with, or are sympathetic to, feminist theory; finally, we consider the three areas and current developments that should challenge and interest those working in this field.

**Feminist historical geographies: gendered genealogies**

In 1988, Rose and Ogborn drew attention to historical geography’s neglect of ‘the empirical achievements of feminism in increasing our understanding of the past’ (405). Their call for greater attentiveness in historical geography to women’s lives and gendered environments also highlighted that existing work of feminist influence was ‘not being written by self-styled historical geographers’ (Rose and Ogborn 1988, 405). Feminist historical geography has since grown, not merely as an act of seeking out the voices of past women but through engaging with new material and researching women’s experiences in diverse spaces. Feminist geographers have conducted important historical work on race, colonialism and urban landscapes (e.g. Anderson 1991; Bressey 2002), women’s labour (e.g. McDowell 2013), community and citizenship (e.g. Cope 1998), children and motherhood (e.g. Gagen 2000; Olson 2019), as well as the gendered history of geography itself (e.g. Maddrell 2009; Monk 2004). Many scholars have reviewed developments in feminist historical geography since Rose and Ogborn’s landmark publication (e.g. Domosh and Morin 2003; Moore 2018; Morin and Berg 1999; Rothenberg et al. 2016) and these commentaries allude to the problems with its ‘place’ in wider disciplinary infrastructures. Indeed, Morin and Berg (1999) explain how, in some contexts, the type of work cited above can also be classed as political, urban or postcolonial geography. Domosh and Morin (2003) also described an ‘undercover feminism’ in historical geography, yet today this is more clearly visible. For example, a recent special issue of *Historical Geography* (2016), explicitly on feminist historical geographies, includes articles on women’s participation in the Royal Geographical Society expeditions (Evans 2016), the relationship between gender and historical ecological reconstructions (Greer and Bols 2016), anarchist geographers and feminism (Ferretti 2016) and women making native space in Quebec (Desbiens and Lévesque 2016). And yet, the guest editors comment how there is still limited representation of feminist work in historical geography arenas, identifying instead a wider ‘alive’ nexus of feminism-history-geography (Rothenberg et al. 2016, 28). More broadly, the studies captured in this special issue echo Domosh’s early argument that feminist historical geography is ‘a way of interpreting landscape that does not establish authorship as the basis of meaning, but rather focuses on the social and cultural context in which that landscape is created’ (1997, 232; see also Domosh 1991). Furthermore, this approach to archival collections demonstrates attentiveness to the gendered politics of the archive as a material space.
Gender plays into both the composition of the archives and the researchers’ ability to extract meaning from them, as the content of collections is indicative of broader societal structures and pressures. As well as the institutional and financial burdens that influence what historical sources are kept by official archives and the value judgements made on whether certain material is worth preserving for posterity, wider social dynamics have influenced the historical record. McDowell recognizes the work of feminist scholars in drawing attention to the gendered division of urban space with, ‘a so-called private arena associated with women and a public world of men’ (1999, 73). At risk of oversimplifying a contentious and heavily critiqued set of debates, in crude terms this notion of separate spheres emerged at a particular historical moment, most notably in relation to the Industrial Revolution, and the home came to occupy a greater significance for women, often as a site of unpaid domestic labour (McDowell 1999). Her research importantly highlights that, while over a third of all women in Britain did engage in paid work between 1850 and 1950, they were largely excluded from more senior, higher-paid roles. This is just one example of the need to understand the place of women through space and time and to understand how this influences the historical record and knowledge production.

In a different historical and geographical context, Morin and Berg note the ‘ideological and embodied gendered differences’ in anti-colonial writing during the Maori Wars in New Zealand in the 1860s, recognizing that, ‘while the men published legal documentation, pastoral letters to Anglican communities, and journals … the women primarily wrote (and published) letters, among themselves and to relatives and associates back in England’ (2001, 208). This example demonstrates that women had ‘limited access to the most “authoritative” venues of writing and publishing’ (Morin and Berg 2001, 208). This gendered landscape of knowledge production has also shaped the writing of history and, while legal documentation by its very nature implies a level of authority, access to these spheres and professions was not equal across time and space; as such, women’s contributions and access to what Domosh calls ‘the formal record’ have been sidelined. Domosh reflects on the subsequent challenges associated with finding women’s voices and suggests that one of the consequences has been ‘a broadening of the definition of reliable and accurate source materials, in order to allow those without access to the formal record to speak to us now’ (1997, 228). It is this approach that has characterized the methodological drive of much feminist historical geography work to date.

This distinctive methodological approach that underpins feminist historical geography work has emerged in response to the gendered conditions and character of archives outlined above, challenging a wider politics of exclusion. This approach involves not only simply including more women in geographies of the past but also utilizing feminist theory more widely within the use of historical research methods. As such, feminist geographers have used archival research to document women’s experiences, conducted oral histories and led historical Geographical Information System projects. Through an attentiveness to voices that have seldom been recorded in the dominant discourse, geographers have been able to challenge the existing narratives and create a more complex and nuanced picture of past lives. Boyer’s practical guidance for conducting feminist historical geography in the archive is an insightful reflection on methodology. She advocates that researchers attend to the importance of power, suggesting that analysis of the influence of power can be determined by looking for certain types of source, those ‘which document transgressions’ (2004, 170). This is a useful guide to account for gaps in official and institutional records, and it is worth considering that the evidence of these transgressions is often deemed valuable and kept in archives on the basis that it documents something extraordinary, remarkable or radical. Yet the mundane and more
‘ordinary’ experiences can be difficult to find, and researchers run the risk of telling the history of marginalized communities only through the eyes of an extraordinary few. For example, in Mills’ (2011) work on gender and youth organizations in early twentieth-century Britain, official archival material is dominated by accounts of a small group of ‘rebel’ girl scouts who demanded to join the Boy Scouts and were later institutionalized as Girl Guides. These extraordinary few are cemented in time via official archival records, yet little is known about the more ordinary or mundane acts of transgression or compliance within these uniformed organizations. Careful fieldwork across multiple archival sites, including personal collections and the triangulation of data, reveals (as much as possible) the everyday lived experience of women, girls and marginalized groups in these spaces. These dilemmas surrounding power and ‘voices’ in the archive require researchers to ask more questions of data, such as considering the potential motivations behind the creation of a source or choice to donate personal texts and objects to an archive. Boyer provides advice on how to come to terms with this challenge of source material that documents transgressions, concluding that ‘this does not preclude the use of such texts as historical documents, but it does require recognizing how questions of textual authority shape the kind of story one constructs’ (2004, 171; see also Gagen 2001). In a recent article, Moore (2018) goes further by advocating emancipatory and participatory archival work that is attentive to, and useful for, understanding the feminist histories of the present.

In the context of these debates on power, representation and archival methods, Bressey (2003) has importantly highlighted the challenges of scarce written source material, namely in recovering the historical geographies of Black people in Britain. Her archival research into these ‘forgotten histories’ (see also Bressey 2002) therefore drew heavily on photographic material from a number of collections. She describes how this visual methodology created an ethical ‘paradox’ for her, in relation to the ‘persistence of race as a means to classify, identify and divide human beings’ (2003, 221) in an anti-racist scholarly project. Bressey’s work on Black women in late-Victorian London not only provokes a series of methodological and ethical reflections, a topic discussed in the next section, but demonstrates the importance of locating these historical geographies within a wider politics of exclusion, marginalization and intersectionality (Brown 2011; Hopkins 2017; Valentine 2007). Although Morin and Berg highlight that ‘Feminist historical geographies are subverting the erasure of women and many Others effaced from geographies of the past’ (1999, 326), more work can and should be done with an attentiveness to inequality that interrogates socio-spatially produced power structures, including patriarchal systems, yet also racism, disablism, homophobia and ageism. The drive for much of this work can be found in many public histories and critical scholarly works that seek to preserve and legitimize subaltern historical knowledge, responding to some of the absences from the historical record. Scott (2017) advocates the use of oral histories in disrupting dominant narratives within work on Black geographies to reveal stories of place and community, and McKittrick’s (2006, 2011) research on Black geographies is a powerful example of trying to write the historical spaces that have literally been rubbed out because of violence.

As McGeachan notes in her latest Progress in Human Geography report on historical geography, archival research can reach into the ‘darkest of terrains’, including gendered violence (i.e. Fuentes 2016, on enslaved women in eighteenth-century Barbados), ‘uncovering geographies that can be almost too painful to bear and too harrowing to witness’ (McGeachan 2017, 10). This dimension to historical research reminds us of the urgent press to consider ethics, even when confronting data about people who are no longer alive. Indeed, the ethics of archival research is one of the central ways in which historical geography has, and can further be, inspired by feminist theory and praxis.
Archival fieldwork: ethical considerations

It is fair to say that, as a subdiscipline, historical geography does not have an extensive literature on ethical fieldwork practice, especially compared to social and cultural geography or the wider social sciences. An important exception is Moore’s (2010) intervention. She writes powerfully about the ethical considerations in her archival fieldwork on abortion in Lancashire in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century (2010; see also Cameron 2001 and Legg 2016 on ethical debates). Moore details her fraught work with sensitive, private and personal material, and the subsequent legal and ethical implications. Moore calls for attentiveness to ‘the conflict of interest that can exist between researcher and participant, even when the participant is dead’ (2010, 268), concluding that all geographers, including those engaged in historical projects, should carefully consider the effects of their research. Moore’s reflections have inspired our own approaches to ethical dilemmas and archival encounters.

In our respective research projects on residential homes for disabled people (Crawford) and youth organizations (Mills), we have both grappled with ethical dilemmas of consent, confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. Indeed, as most archival work involves tracing the lives of individuals either through detailed biography or as actors within a wider narrative, researchers have a responsibility to handle these (usually past) lives with care and to consider how they are (re)presented. In navigating these struggles, we have sought an approach that employs reflexivity, liaising closely with archivists (and, indeed, published work by archivists; see Schwarz 1992) and, when appropriate, consulting named individuals or family members, if possible. This logistics is often shaped by the nature of the historical material in question, for example public or private collections and the conditions of use imposed by owners and guardians. At times, concerns over privacy and sensitive data have led us to use pseudonyms for historical research subjects, where relevant. For example, in a recent project involving children’s accounts of everyday home and school life from 1960s and 1980s London, pseudonyms for individuals and schools were used to protect the rights of these historical subjects, who may still be living at those addresses or connected to local areas as adults (Mills 2017). In other cases, anonymity is a more complex and political dilemma, with researchers having to rely on their own moral compass to navigate the most appropriate approach to handling data. In Crawford’s ongoing research on residential homes, some individuals in the archival material are identifiable through their political activism, either by association or through their networks, meaning that anonymity can be incredibly difficult to achieve, not least as some were public figures and their stories are in the public domain. Furthermore, there is a wider political motivation in naming the research subjects frozen in time in the archival material. Wright and Saucier (2012) discuss how protecting anonymity and using pseudonyms can run counter to a desire to empower and give voice to marginalized individuals and groups, framing these ethical conundrums in the context of researching mental health, disability and medicine. Citing Iacovetta and Mitchinson (1998), they suggest that ‘our legal obligations as researchers to protect the privacy of individuals in the past can lead us to write the marginal into history by writing their names and faces out of it’ (Wright and Saucier 2012, 76). Anonymity, in this context, is seemingly at odds with the notion of agency, and it calls into question whether academic conventions are continuing to marginalize and silence voices that have previously been hidden.

In critically reflecting on our own archival practice, we have also tried to respond to Bailey, Brace and Harvey’s (2009, 255) call in their discussion of collaborative archival work ‘for geographers to maintain a reflexive approach to their historically grounded identities’. Indeed, we advocate an approach to doing historical research that explicitly considers positionality (see also Mills 2012). Although usually associated with social research and encounters with living
subjects, positionality is also an important consideration in historical work. The selection of research topics and reading of archival material are unquestionably shaped by positionality, including but not limited to gender, race, religion and class.

Whether it is for collaborative or individual research, archival fieldwork is not neutral or somehow ‘excused’ from ethical considerations by virtue of its ‘distance’ from historical subjects. Indeed, many research projects use archival methods that involve subjects who are still alive or who are, when in combination with oral history data. As such, historical research does host ethical dilemmas, yet these are not always recognized within institutional and funding guidelines and frameworks (Tesar 2015). Ethical dilemmas occur in any research project, therefore the topic of doing ethical historical research should be a regular discussion among academic communities and as part of relevant forums and conferences. There is also a need for training postgraduate and early-career researchers in how to strike a balance between sharing material in the public interest as part of research projects against the rights of historical subjects to protection and privacy, and in what contexts this is appropriate. These issues are growing in importance, especially in the UK, where the boundaries between historical and contemporary research practices are blurring. First, historical researchers are increasingly creating their own ‘archival’ collections through their own fieldwork photographs and digital notes, perhaps collating and storing data from multiple sites and creating their own personal records. Second, geographers across the discipline who are engaged in contemporary research (e.g. interviews, focus groups or ethnography) are becoming guardians and custodians of ‘new archives’ of database material (e.g. interview transcripts, participatory artwork) that is increasingly cleaned and deposited to funding websites or held in institutional collections for future preservation, research use or public engagement (Mills 2017). Overall, these ethical and data management challenges are part of a wider politics of research practice and link to much deeper questions about the role, purpose and practice of research.

Changing practices, ongoing politics

This section discusses three areas where changing (and hidden) practices are beginning to push scholars to consider research practice anew. These selected examples signal important changes that open up a space for new and different kinds of feminist practice, as well as presenting new ethical challenges. In selecting these three particular areas, we highlight how each case aligns with and furthers feminist practice. They are important considerations for researchers engaged in archival fieldwork and represent new opportunities to expand feminist engagements by further considering who ‘makes’ history.

First, the practices of collecting and archiving, especially in the context of hidden labour, are vital considerations yet are often marginalized. Questions of who does the work of archiving (before a researcher even accesses any material) are important, especially as unanswered concerns for feminists. The labour of archivists is often hidden, especially the emotional labour of preserving, rescuing and collecting material that is often gendered in relation to the voluntary action of community and charity groups in civil society. A recent post on Twitter from Guy Walters – author, historian and journalist – claimed to have ‘discovered’ a letter from British philosopher Bertrand Russell, stating ‘Of all the letters I’ve unearthed in archives, this is by far the best’,1 and his post received over a million impressions via different social media platforms. It did, however, provoke a backlash of responses, primarily from professional archivists and librarians, after McMaster Archives & Research Collections, Ontario, Canada (which holds the original letter) replied, ‘What’s vulgar is refusing to acknowledge the people who selected, bought, catalogued, and preserved the letter so you could read it – us … we don’t treat [material] as our exclusive
discovery ... they are our common heritage’. In many ways, social media has given a voice to the often-hidden work of archivists, challenging the problematic notion that academics discover hidden gems in their collections rather than accessing the material through professionals’ support. A further response on Twitter, from archivist Sian Collins, included images of historical papers in severe disrepair and a pile of hand-removed rusty paperclips, with the comment: ‘This is what some collections look like pre-archivist, before they are “discovered” by others.’ (Collins 2 October 2017). This exchange is indicative of a wider debate on the construction and (re)production of knowledge and the past. Indeed, the practices of collection, preservation, recording and display are political. The processes of ‘archivalization’ (Ashmore et al. 2012; Ketelaar 2001), of how archives come into being and the labour involved in their creation and maintenance, are important concerns for feminist theorists, as outlined earlier in relation to the wider politics of the archive and gendered construction of knowledge.

Second, ‘new’ archival collections and spaces are critical to the placement of otherwise narrowly dictated histories. For example, within our own research areas on religious youth work and people with learning disabilities are emerging archives and collections that document the lives and experiences of minority groups, driven and shaped by communities themselves. These important new collections create opportunities for scholarship and educational activities, yet also have power through a politics of representation that is politically vital to contemporary society. A clear example is the recent opening of East London Mosque’s new archives in November 2017. As the UK’s first-ever Muslim purpose-built strongroom, the archive contains around 250,000 documents relating to one of the country’s oldest mosques and the wider local Muslim community. At the opening, Mayor of London Sadiq Khan stated that ‘familiarity with our history frees us from false narratives’ and Dr Jamil Sherif, Chair of the Archives Project’s Steering Committee, explained that the archives ‘allow the Muslim experience to be woven into the tapestry of British social history … without that narrative, Muslims are always going to be considered as the “Other”’ (cited in Hussain 2017). This example, although isolated, demonstrates the important role of historical material and feminist theorizing for a range of communities, both within and beyond academia.

Online platforms can also facilitate the creation of new archival collections, despite the challenges of the digital age and pressures for archives to digitize catalogues and material. These online platforms can lead to self-advocacy and representation by diverse communities through the creation and curation of non-traditional archival collections.

One such example is the Big 30 Project by the London-based creative arts company and charity, Heart n Soul: ‘the first of its kind where people with learning disabilities tell their own stories in their own words, creating a unique archive of learning disability culture’ (Heart n Soul, 2017). The archive is a celebration of artistic expression, whereby people with learning disabilities share their experiences through photography, stories and music. As Ono from the Big 30 Archive website states, ‘People with a learning disability are slowly breaking the glass ceiling and showing what they can do’ (The Big 30 n.d). This example shows that archives are multi-scalar, with local and community-based collections often documenting more intimate and personal experiences than do the national or government-funded collections. Furthermore, this example illustrates how the process of selecting and creating material to contribute to an archive can be a political act, designed to challenge established societal norms. It is not just our role as academic researchers to visit, read and critically engage with archival collections as part of our research and pedagogy, but to listen, support, advocate and collaboratively engage (where appropriate) with archivists, civil society groups and local communities in their plans for new collections or creative responses to existing material. Within the UK, this type of public engagement work will be even more vital in austere times, as archives and libraries are under extreme pressure from...
funding cuts and face growing precarity, particularly within the charity and voluntary sector (Brewis 2012).

Finally, archives have been important resources for activism and preserving the legacy of attempts to combat injustice. As Rose and Ogborn outline, ‘there have always been struggles against such oppression and so it is also vital that historical geography maps the creation by women of these spaces of resistance’ (1988, 408). Feminist activisms (see Hancock, Bettinger and Manseri, Chapter 39 in this volume) are an important part of social history, and the relationship between activism and archives includes the vital task of archiving the present contemporary moment and political engagements. For example, the collective efforts by archives and museums across the globe to preserve artwork, signs and banners from the Women’s March in January 2017 that followed the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States. While Moore (2018) has highlighted the significance of this event in terms of feminist histories of the present, here we briefly describe the (changing) archival practices at play during and after such a protest. Following these global protests, calls for photos, videos and signs were posted by the Smithsonian Museum in Washington DC, right through to smaller libraries and collections across the world. Newberry Library in Chicago was one of the archives that began ‘crowdsourcing’ material, mostly via social media requests, and it gave donors the option to submit short narratives alongside their posters and creative submissions (Levitt 2017). There were also more haphazard encounters with (future) historic material from the Women’s March: for example, the ‘accidental archive’ in Boston after local residents rescued assembled banners from an impending rubbish collection (Deruy 2017). These examples demonstrate the changing nature of archival practice and shifts in methods of sourcing, depositing and collecting material, as well as the wider role of citizens (including researchers) in constructing and shaping future collections.

Conclusion

Historical geography has undoubtedly been enriched by the influence of feminist principles, theories and approaches and, likewise, feminist geography has expanded its scope and wider contributions through historical work and archival encounters. Indeed, as Boyer claims, ‘historical geography can bring temporal depth and a different kind of texture to feminist geography; feminist geography can and should inform the study of past spaces and past worlds’ (2004, 173). This chapter has provided an overview of ‘doing historical research’ and outlined important debates on the practice and politics of archival fieldwork. Although the chapter is most relevant to those already engaging with, or considering embarking on, historical research projects, its discussion about power and the ethics of research should also have a wider reach. This chapter has reflected on practices of activism, curation and advocacy. As such, this discussion only speaks to established or budding archival researchers, but to a broader audience concerned with practising human geography and the important relationship between gender, politics and ethics.

Notes

1 https://twitter.com/guywalters/status/91329775885365248.
2 https://twitter.com/MacResColls/status/913842397800534016.
3 https://twitter.com/SianECollins/status/914765553868443648.

Key readings


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**References**


Historical research: gender, politics and ethics


