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THE PAST INFORMS THE FUTURE

*The Role of Historical Research in Modern Scholarship:
Researchers' Experiences*



***You have to
know the past
to understand
the present.***

- Carl Sagan



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Introduction

Archival material comes in many forms. Diaries, newspaper articles, video and audio are just some of the documents housed in physical and digital archives around the world, preserved for future generations.

Journal and book archives contain work going right back to primary source research articles and data which present original thinking, report on discoveries, or share new information.

This first-hand evidence, with no secondary analysis or interpretation, allows users to get as close as possible to the research origins, and the originator's thoughts. Most of the research being undertaken today could not be done without access to the foundations laid by researchers who have gone before.

We were interested to know how researchers draw on the resources available to them, and how important prior research is to them in their work today.



THE ONGOING IMPACT OF PAST RESEARCH - CASE STUDIES



DAMON MAYRL

I follow footnotes back to the original work, and I often find that things are read through different eyes down the line, so the meaning changes.



Sociologists like to see how theories change over time - you can see how debates have changed.



Damon Mayrl, Associate Professor of Sociology at Colby College, and Nicholas Wilson, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Stony Brook University, spoke to us about the importance of archival materials in their research, both individually and in collaboration.

I use a variety of historical sources in my work. In my first book, [Secular Conversions](#), I examined how administrative structures, legal procedures, and electoral systems have helped shape religion's role in public life over time.

Over the course of this research, I drew on existing historical analyses of religious education policy in the United States and Australia. For example, Australian scholars in the 1970s had written quite a bit about conflicts over religion in Australian schools. There is also a large scholarly literature on church and state in American education in the 19th and 20th centuries. This material was invaluable for my own research.

I used published secondary sources in other ways, too, in the course of constructing my

arguments. One was to get a sense of what arguments have been made, and tracking down if they're historically accurate. Sociologists like to see how theories change over time - you can see how debates have changed and how the historical record has been interpreted.

So when I was reading a history, I wanted to know what the origins of these sources are, as it's often the case that the original scholar was not making the same point as the one who quoted their work. In my work, I followed footnotes back to the original sources, and I often found that things had been read through different eyes down the line, so the meaning changes. Things get left behind. You often find more sources as well this way.

For this reason, the use of primary materials is becoming more prevalent in sociology today, rather than only evidence from secondary histories.

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The entire edifice of historical sociology is built on large resources. Without access to the older literature I wouldn't be able to conduct my research at all.



Past research can deliver new insights into thus untapped sources.



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NICHOLAS WILSON

My current work centres around corruption in the East India Trading Company, and requires the use of quite a variety of archival materials - at the British Library, Kew, and the Colonial Office Archives.

I focus on the organisational politics, checking historians' work for bias. So, archival sources play a major role in this research - I'm looking at journal archives to verify published sources which have been cited. A lot of historical sociology focuses on secondary histories, which are synthesized into an argument, but it's becoming more prevalent now to use primary sources as well.

Although British Imperial History is very heavily studied, I've discovered important facts by accessing archival materials. For example, in my journey back through the literature, I came across a character who hasn't been studied much at all, John Macpherson. What he did is very interesting, and he's more important than previously thought. He was active in policy reform and anti-corruption, yet history hasn't paid much attention to him.

Things get overlooked if they aren't picked up on in the secondary literature, and diving further back through past research can deliver new insights into thus untapped sources.

COLLABORATION

The two sociologists have joined together to investigate analytic architectures in historical sociology, which came about as they found there were few sources on how historical sociologists construct their arguments or check their research. The outcome of the project will be a methods book on how to conduct historical sociology research.

During the course of this research, they conducted nearly 70 interviews and gathered data measuring what sociologists do.

"There's not a single way to conduct research in historical sociology," says Damon. Looking at the extent to which sociologists read original materials carefully, we found that while scholars continue to make use of secondary sources in building their arguments, they increasingly incorporate original primary data. Our data shows that having access to a wide variety of historical sources is essential for the work historical sociologists do.

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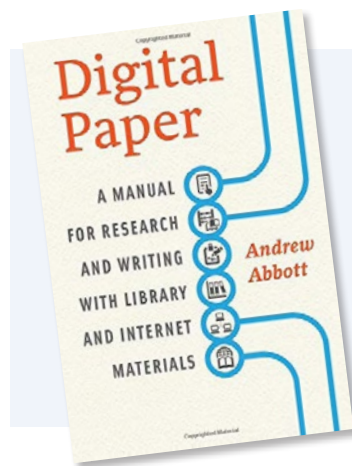
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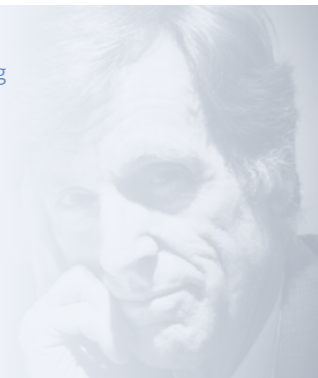
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“We’re approaching research as a long-term creative process, which involves fidelity to evidence and archives, and social influences”, says Nicholas. “It’s the only way out of the replication crisis”.



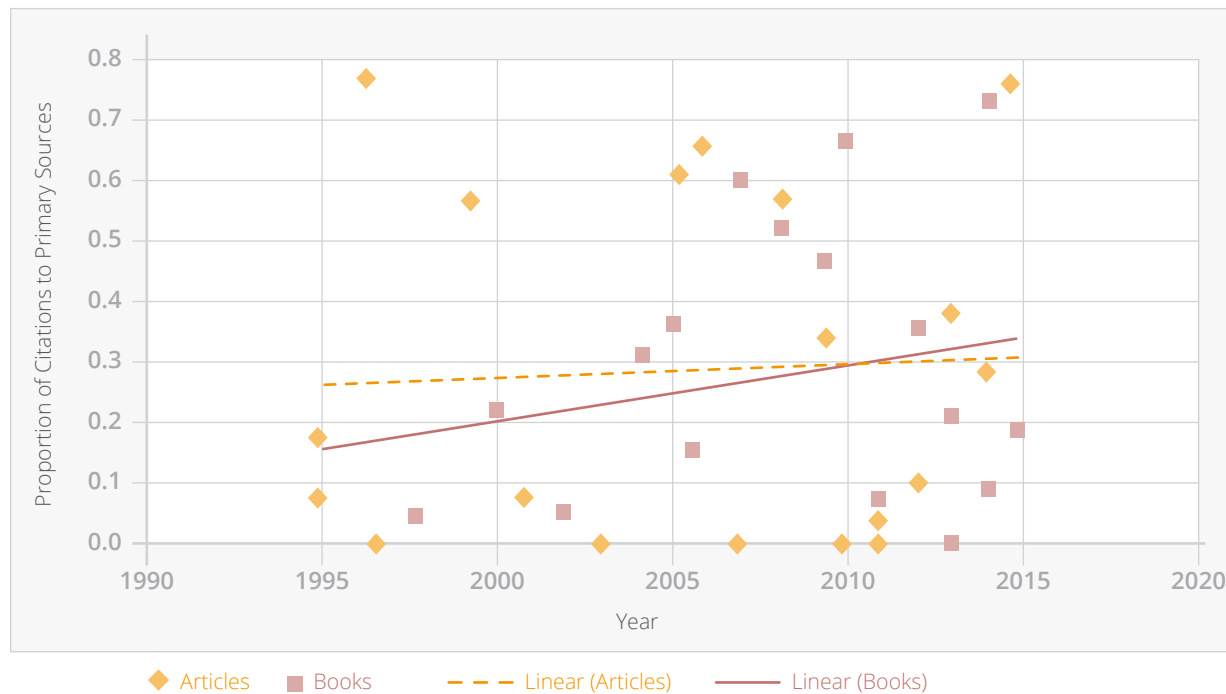
Damon and Nick recommend Andrew Abbott’s book *Digital Paper*, a project management manual for working with prior research in libraries and on the internet.

Abbott, a sociologist of knowledge, supports the view that research is not a linear process, but rather more an exploration through a non-linear world of physical and electronic resources. He explains how to follow a trail through the overwhelming mass of information available, and how to evaluate data and prior research.



Trends in the relative use of primary and secondary evidence, 1995–2015

AJS Volume 125 Number 5 (March 2020): 1345–1394



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Both **Damon** and **Nick** are clear that they could not do their work without access to prior research. It would make historical sociology research impossible, and scholars in general wouldn't be able to authenticate anything, or track original sources.



Post-pandemic research

Post-COVID, both sociologists have seen their work become a lot more digital.

Visits to physical archives have been ruled out, which in some cases has forced colleagues to cancel planned projects and opt for something else. With the increasing importance of tracing a path back through journal archives, institutional subscriptions to digital archives are more valuable than ever.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to Damon and Nick for participating in this project and sharing their invaluable insights with us.

It allows us a closer look at quite how important the past is for the present research community, and highlights the role of the library in the search for clarity and authenticity.

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