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from the Sex Work Activist Histories Project
Archivage à enjeux élevés et relationnalité : conversations du
Sex Work Activist Histories Project

Danielle Allard, Shawna Ferris, Amy Lebovitch, Jenn Clamen and Micheline Hughes

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Article abstract

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High-stakes Recordkeeping and Relationality: Conversations from the Sex Work Activist Histories Project

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The Sex Work Activist Histories Project (SWAHP) is an interdisciplinary research and record-keeping initiative to record and disseminate the radical knowledges, activist expertise, and important social movement histories created by activists connected to the Canadian sex worker rights movement. This paper explores how stakeholders of SWAHP work together ethically, and maintain good relations with each other when engaging in what we call high-stakes record-keeping. Our discussions consider both the divergences or differences between academic and non-academic project partners, our convergence or common ground, and the bridges we have built between academic and non-academic concerns and practices to establish and develop methodologies and practices that inform SWAHP's ongoing collaborations and sex-work activist histories, archives, and related activism. We consider how to be mutually accountable to our varied and complex analytical and affective positionalities in the specific context of working ethically and relationally in high-stakes recordkeeping. We conclude by considering the relevance of these lessons to other contexts of community-led archiving and research. This paper is a lightly edited transcript of the speaker notes from a 2021 CAIS/ACSI (Allard, Ferris, Lebovitch, Clamen, and Hughes, 2021) panel presentation. Project partners are identified individually in their article sections to share, highlight, and preserve what is unique about each project partners' perspective and voice, and to make explicit how we work together.

Keywords: community archiving, sex work activism, high-stakes recordkeeping, feminism, relationality

Introduction

Around the world and in Canada, sex work activists agitate for the removal of laws that criminalize sex workers and their clients. They argue that these laws marginalize and stigmatize them, leaving them especially vulnerable to extreme violence. In the context of this fight to make themselves safer, sex work activists also struggle to humanize themselves to hostile journalists, politicians, police, courts, academics, and a wider public. An influential and connected Canadian sex worker rights movement has, for decades now, been engaging in an array of remarkable resistance projects that counter dangerous sex work laws and dehumanizing public perceptions about sex workers (Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform, 2024; Ferris, 2016; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; Lebovitch & Ferris, 2019; Pivot Legal Society, 2015).

The Sex Work Activist Histories Project (SWAHP) is an interdisciplinary research and recordkeeping project to find, create, preserve, and disseminate the radical knowledges, activist expertise, and important social movement histories created by many of these activists. SWAHP has set out to (1) collect or record, write, curate, preserve, and/or engage with more than forty years of activist histories from some of the longest-standing sex worker-led organizations in Canada; (2) augment, develop, and implement methodologies and best practices for valuing and sharing knowledge and expertise between non-academic and academic communities; (3) develop methodologies and best practices for the sharing/recording and preservation of alternative histories told/represented in ways that matter to their creators, and (4) support and contribute to feminist anti-violence scholarship and activism that contests conceptions of violence against certain people as deserved and expected. Out of necessity, SWAHP challenges traditional archival paradigms where archival institutions are neutral repositories that preserve records once they are no longer in use. In instances where the histories of vulnerable populations are themselves marginalized, these stories and

histories must be actively sought, cultivated, and created to counter their exclusions from mainstream conversations and traditional archives. We work with sex work activist communities to create and preserve their histories.

The Sex Work Database is one of several initiatives of SWAHP. It is a digital activist archives containing the archival records of sex work activist organizations across Canada. It includes thousands of digitized and born-digital activist archival records created by sex work activist organizations, including pamphlets, posters, photographs, postcards, annual reports, newspaper clippings, websites and blogs. SWAHP team works with sex work activist organizations across Canada to scan, organize, and describe these materials for inclusion in the Sex Work Database. When it becomes publicly available, the Sex Work Database will be the only national digital resource that collects and makes publicly available the rarely told story of sex work activism in Canada.

As an activist archives, the Sex Work Database has an explicit political agenda. It not only preserves the sex work activist movement in Canada; it is itself activist, advocating for the social liberation and human rights of sex workers and the decriminalization of sex work. Like other activist archives, SWD also seeks to “combat institutional modes of erasure and challenge dominant historical narratives” (Lobo, 2019, p. 66). The Sex Work Database is also a community archives (Sheffield, 2017; Flinn, 2010) in that the archival records of SWD have been created and are described by activist communities. Although it operates with significant activist community support, SWD is also stewarded by academics, complicating its definition as solely a community archives. While community archives take many forms, they are broadly defined as archival collections that are controlled by the communities whose records are included within that collection (Sheffield, 2017). SWAHP was initiated and is managed by a team comprised of sex work activists, academics (in women’s and gender studies and information and archival studies), and (previously) a graduate student research assistant from Indigenous Studies. Community involvement is built into this project throughout. We regularly work alongside members and representatives of sex work activist organizations across Canada. This work would be impossible without the support and paid work of the sex work activists with whom we collaborate. Although project members come from different professional and social locations, we work closely together in contexts that can be both challenging and very rewarding.

Activist and community archiving is notoriously complicated by many factors, including lack of long-term funding, fragility of materials, project sustainability challenges, high turnover rates of those involved, and the social risks to community members who often come from vulnerable communities and/or are documenting potentially risky or dangerous subjects and events such as police violence and protest movements. A heartbreaking challenge to SWD archiving is that

the extreme violence to which sex work activists across the continent respond is also visited upon them. Serious, too, is the reality of activist burnout in these dire contexts, which also affects activists’ longevity in sex work activism. These risks also underline the urgency of sex work activist archiving. The SWD team itself also faces ongoing challenges to our collaborative work. We often have divergent vocabularies, project priorities, accountabilities, understandings of what is at stake, and risks and vulnerabilities between and among the sex work activist organization members and academic partners in this relationship/partnership. At the same time, project members share many tasks, including the work of project administration and decision making, record arrangement and description, and the use of analytical and critical thinking skills to further project goals. Perhaps most importantly, we share a wish to explore and uncover how we might put archival processes at the service of sex work activism and decriminalization. In other words, we work closely together in a context that we have come to call high-stakes recordkeeping.

Defining high-stakes recordkeeping

This paper introduces the notion of high-stakes recordkeeping to articulate the urgency of SWAHP, to unpack how multiple project urgencies and affiliations shape how project members across communities and institutions work together, and to underline that this urgency is derived from the activist, collaborative, community-led, and relational dimensions of the project. In other words, project high-stakes fundamentally shape how the SWD archives is defined, developed, and ultimately what it becomes. According to CollinsDictionary.com, “a high-stakes game or contest is one in which the people involved can gain or lose a great deal”. While archiving is certainly not a game, the term high-stakes is used here to denote that there can be both high risk, high reward, and important social benefits in recordkeeping. We thus define high-stakes recordkeeping as archiving that is informed and shaped by the urgent, high risk, and high rewards social justice context in which recordkeeping occurs, and simultaneously, that it documents.

Within the SWD recordkeeping context particularly, this is high-stakes recordkeeping for both sex working communities broadly and for those who work on the project specifically. For sex working communities, this project is high-stakes because of the activist goals that are at the heart of the project, including sex work decriminalization, opposing whore stigma, and promoting human rights for sex workers. Ensuring that the history of sex work activism is shared among sex workers and the general public humanizes sex workers and ensures that important lessons about social movement organizing are shared. When marginalized communities, such as sex working communities, are silenced and/or often subject to physical violence, high stakes include the right to humanity and non-violence for affected communities. For folks who work on

the SWD project, the urgency and complex social context of sex work activism also create personal high stakes. For example, project members feel a strong sense of responsibility and accountability to other sex workers to share their stories. They are also keenly aware of the complexities of sharing sex workers' histories while retaining the anonymity of activists who do not wish to disclose their involvement in sex work or sex work activism to their family and friends. Making mistakes can have dire consequences. As authors of this paper elaborate below, operating within this fraught and critically important context brings heightened social and individual risks and rewards.

Importantly, the concept of high-stakes recordkeeping centres both the difficult and traumatic and the beautiful, joyful, and meaningful. Archival scholars have pointed to the significance of affect in archiving (Cifor & Gilliland, 2016; Gilliland, 2014), and especially emotions such as joy and anger (Caswell, 2020). Alongside this work is a growing body of literature acknowledging the practical and emotional challenges of working with traumatic, difficult, and violent collections (Nathan et al., 2015; Sloan, Vanderfluit, & Douglas, 2019; Wright, & Laurent, 2021). Within SWD too, project members describe joy, hope, and excitement as well as the potential risks of violence, anger, trauma, and the potential for disagreement among communities. These affective dimensions contribute to the urgent context of high-stakes recordkeeping, making the work harder and more important.

High-stakes recordkeeping shapes how we work together

High-stakes recordkeeping shapes how we work together. Exactly because the stakes are socially and personally high, high-stakes recordkeeping requires a care and relational orientation to the work. Feminist and Indigenous notions of ethical, affective, and relational accountability (among groups, between academics and non-academics involved in a project, and between humans and their records/histories) shape our understanding of what it means to be in ethical relationship with other humans, communities, and in this instance, archival records (Agustin, 2004; Brown & Strega, 2005; Caswell, 2014; Caswell & Cifor, 2016; UNAIDS & WHO, 2007; Wilson, 2012). As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson notes in *Rehearsals for Living*, “visiting and developing relationships of trust [are] foundational to any exchange of knowledge and experience” (2022, p. 32). Within LIS and archival studies, there are growing conversations about community-driven practices, including a growing literature and practice describing how archivists and academics might work ethically within and alongside marginalized communities (Drake, T et al., 2022; Godoy, 2021; Payne, 2022; Williams & Drake, 2017; Zavala et al., 2017). Caswell and Cifor, for example, draw from feminist ethics of care to suggest that “archivists [should be] seen as caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual

affective responsibility” (2016, p. 23). In the adjacent context of working with digital materials, Rault & Cowan (n.d.) articulate a research method of heavy processing, calling it a “lesbian-leaning trans-feminist and queer method” where careful, ethical, and collaborative material processing of materials is central to the product. Process over product. In alignment with the emerging research and praxis of those scholars and communities who have carefully explored care and relationality within their own archiving and other contexts, this article offers the related perspectives of those who work together on SWAHP.

We explore how stakeholders of SWAHP work together ethically and maintain good relations with each other when the risks and rewards of our shared work are high. Our discussions consider both the divergences or differences between academic and non-academic project partners, our convergence or common ground, and the bridges we have built between academic and non-academic concerns and practices to establish and develop methodologies and practices that inform SWAHP's ongoing collaborations and sex-work activist histories, archives, and related activism. We consider how to be mutually accountable for our varied and complex analytical and affective positionalities in the specific context of this work and as we move forward together.

This article takes the non-traditional format of a transcript of a conference panel discussion originally presented at the CAIS/ACSI conference (Allard et al., 2021). This approach is employed to capture the distinct voices and perspectives of members of SWAHP. Here, we make visible how the influences of a) the urgent and risky working conditions that define sex work activism and activist archiving and b) each team member's distinct positionality on the project shape how the team has learned to work ethically together. As we will make clear, the urgency of the project requires ongoing, careful, and self-reflexive discussions of our work together. Indeed, we use the lens of high-stakes recordkeeping because it is by articulating the specificities of these urgent contexts and the personal and political risks and rewards that we understand how best to proceed with our work together.

Method

This work is part of the Knowledge Symbiosis article series, part of the Ecosystems for Community Research and Recordkeeping project (Ferris et al., 2023). This series of scholarly articles was designed to translate community knowledge into academic language, making this knowledge available in scholarly formats and spaces. With the intention of broadening and encouraging knowledge exchange or symbiosis within and between scholarly and community constituencies, this series moves beyond the unidirectional flow of scholarly knowledge into marginalized communities that is sometimes implied in the concept of “knowledge translation”.

This article was originally presented as a panel discussion

at the CAIS/ACSI conference (Allard et al., 2021). Here, we elaborate on the themes identified in that extended conference abstract and offer a more thoroughly articulated discussion of the conference panel. We have included slightly revised speaker notes from each of us as we grappled with the important issue of working together in ethical and relational ways in the context of high-stakes recordkeeping. We present these research discussions in an unconventional format for this journal. In their seminal article, “Love and Lubrication in the Archives or rukus!: A Black Queer Archive for the United Kingdom”, X et al. (2009) introduce their community archive rukus using a transcript format that shines a spotlight on the voices of community members and archive founders Ajamu Z and Topher Campbell. About the format of their paper, they say,

“This unusual format was chosen in order to allow Ajamu and Topher to present their work in their own words and on their own terms. The choice of format also seeks to reflect the idea of the archive as an intensely social practice, part of the process of fostering a shared memory that emerges only through dialogue” (p. 272).

Following X, Campbell, and Steven’s (2009) approach, we also want to ensure that the voice of each author here is individually identifiable and that our unique perspectives are not conflated or appear interchangeable. On the project, we often do speak in a single voice when we present the work. In this instance, however, it is important to highlight our separate voices and concerns. Being in dialogue and learning from each team member is also a key element of how ethical project relationships are maintained.

We organized our original panel discussion around a series of questions for each speaker designed to demonstrate how the stakes of the project for each team member shape how we work together. We have organized this conversation below in the same way, each of us answering the following questions.

Questions for community partners:

- What histories do you want this project to remember?
- What makes this high-stakes recordkeeping for you? What makes this work important? What makes it difficult?
- How are good relationships on the project maintained? What else do you want researchers to learn from this panel?

Questions for academic partners:

- What are your ethical and academic responsibilities on the project?
- What makes this risky or high-stakes recordkeeping for you? What makes this work important? What makes it difficult?

- How are good relationships on the project maintained? What else have you learned on the project that your academic training didn’t teach you?

Conversation

Included below is a lightly edited transcript of the presentation given by each panel member. Presentations are provided here in the order that they were given. As noted above, this method preserves what is unique about each project partners’ perspective and voice.

Community partner - Amy Lebovitch is the Executive Director of Sex Professionals of Canada, a Toronto-based sex work activist organization

Question 1. What histories do you want this project to remember?

I want to remember and record how diverse sex workers are. I want to remember the histories of sex workers who use drugs and other sex workers who are marginalized, even within our movement, and who are often not included in mainstream activism because of “respectability politics”.

I think HOW we remember is more important than what we remember. As sex workers, our histories are often told by academics. And while sex workers and activists tell and share and remember our own histories in so many different ways, society has this fucked up idea that libraries and academia hold histories. I would argue that our histories are routinely NOT held or represented in a way that benefits sex workers in those spaces, or in a way that benefits our collective fight for rights and the reduction of whore stigma. In fact, these spaces reinforce and exacerbate whore stigma.

Question 2. What makes this high-stakes recordkeeping for you? What makes this work important? What makes it difficult?

Our work feels high-stakes for me on a few different levels: personally, politically, ethically. I am in a few different roles on the project. I am part of the project, helping to manage and record the histories, and at the same time, I also have been part of those histories or at the very least, they are about my community of sex workers, my colleagues, and my friends. In my role on the project, I feel a sense of accountability. Am I doing things correctly? Am I making the right decisions for my community?

With grants and funding especially, things move slowly. We have a small team. We can’t work with all the activist groups, record all the histories, and do everything all at once. I have feelings about that. This project will take years and years of continued work. This isn’t going to take a few years and it’s done. It will take years to complete, maintain and add to, because our activism keeps going. This is not a project that can be created and walked away from. How do we continue

to get funding to do this long-term work? How do we do this within the academic system that, from my perspective as part of an “over-researched” population, is interested in coming into our communities, recording their findings, and going out? Leaving. It’s rare for research to continue far beyond the initial project, and in fact, grants are often not designed for projects that are continuations of other projects. Research is funded when it contains new ideas. This has to change. This creates problems for projects like these, which move beyond community-based research, or even community-based participatory research, and into community-driven research, which, by the way, is the **ONLY** ethical way to do research **WITH** sex workers. Period.

I feel the need to get everyone’s records in the archive as soon as possible because I know all too well that histories get lost when we lose people, when things burn down, when people have to leave behind boxes of records and artifacts because of eviction, and because of other tragedies. But I also know that things take time. I know that we are not only taking care of the actual records but also the stories behind those records and making sure the tags on the records are from a sex worker rights-based position. We are not simply “recording” but participating in preserving these histories in a way that honours individuals, groups, stories, memories, folks’ lives, and folks’ work. This archive promotes a strong rights-based approach. We make sure that our activist stories are told in a way that honours folks. It’s a lot of pressure, and it’s a lot of fighting to get our project done in a way that feels ethical to sex workers. Not ethical to the university. Not ethical to Shawna or Danielle or Micheline’s peers, but to my peers. My sex worker community.

Question 3. *How are good relationships on the project maintained? What else do you want researchers to learn from this panel?*

Good relationships are maintained through honesty, integrity, and not just going along with the rules of the academy; instead we work through it, piercing it, and making it work for us. We work to challenge the powers that hold funds, that hold ideas, that hold histories, and that apparently hold ethics. We make sure that our community knows that those on this project don’t just want to sit back and work under these bad policies and harmful ways that allow research to continue on us often in bad, unhelpful, and harmful ways. On the project, we want to maintain good relationships with community by showing up for community. We want to pay people well. We recognize that community holds great knowledge and expertise and we work to use the power of the academy to meet community wants, needs, and goals.

I want researchers to know that we are not something to research. Go research something else. But, if you want to help us, if you want to use your power to facilitate projects and initiatives and research that we can actually use, then do

so. As a non sex worker, what you think is cool or interesting or needed, is likely not needed. Please use your power to make useful change. Please use your resources to help my community achieve what we need. We are the experts in our own lives, and we need you to use your powers for good. Ask us what we need. We will tell you.

Community partner - Jenn Clamen represents Stella, l’amie de Maimie, a Montreal based sex work activist organization

Question 1. *What histories do you want this project to remember?*

We want people to remember the diversity of sex workers that have been organizing in some of the most difficult conditions. In the almost 30 years that Stella has been active, thousands of sex workers have come through her doors. Sex workers’ stories are so often minimized or sensationalized, and the real diversity of sex workers’ complex lives is rarely represented in popular media, feminist movements, and the public. Sex workers’ stories are also glorified, and sex workers are discounted as either “happy hookers” or “victims”. Ensuring that recordkeeping captures the broad and diverse library of stories is the only way that we can show the truths about the diverse and many communities who do sex work. For example, people need to know that the foundations of the sex worker rights movement in Montreal are in trans and street organizing. The documentation that we have to tell that story is important - the photos, the posters, the flyers.

We also want to ensure that the differences in style, personality, and methods of resisting are recorded – including the depth of creativity in our resistance movements. Resistance and advocacy are so difficult and take so much time and resources from people’s lives as they struggle to survive the conditions of criminalization, discrimination, and stigma. And people resist in so many formal and informal ways that need to be documented. Most informal organizing - and even moments of formal organizing - are not documented, so we need to take extra care to contextualize what has been documented. Our organizations have had the privilege of collecting artifacts from this organizing. These stories and artifacts need to be told and shared to inspire and inform the next generations of sex workers.

We want to remember the sense of community and how actions and moments brought people together. So much of this community can be seen in the power of the photos and documents and recorded words.

Sex workers are judged and critiqued, and at every moment, people try to discount them. Showcasing and remembering the things that people refuse to see, in the hopes that one day they will see and understand and that sex workers may experience less discrimination as a result of this understanding – that’s why it’s important to remember and showcase

these memories.

Question 2. What makes this high-stakes recordkeeping for you? What makes this work important? What makes it difficult?

For the same reasons that it is important to tell these stories, it's dangerous to put them in the public. They can be misused, appropriated, and told without context. Context is everything. What the story is behind the artifact, who it was created by, what was going on in the city at the time of its creation, what was going on in the political, physical, and social environment when the artifact was created all tell the story. The artifact on its own only tells a partial - and incomplete - story. And without context, the people, places, and textures of that moment are invisible. So the stakes are high to avoid this erasure, and we need to ensure that we provide the context to each of the stories and artifacts - so that the story is told with the rich context that informed its creation.

Another reason that this is high-stakes recordkeeping is because to create an archive, we rely on the people and institutions that hold these memories, and we need to be diligent to ensure we are continuously recording and adding to the archive. SWD feels vital, and urgent, in a context of constant violence, erasure, and threat - the memories can't remain with individuals alone because people leave the sex industry and disassociate with activist communities, they die, and they move on. The records feel precious and important to keep, and it sometimes feels like a big rush to do that keeping. There is also concern for who will pick up the mantle of keeping the records and how we teach the next generation to use the records as they were intended.

Because the records are filled with memories - going through the past and looking at the stories can be useful, but can also be painful. This also feels like high-stakes work. Seeing the photos and documents and memories of people we have lost - it can be melancholic, and also enraging. The recordkeeping is one way of ensuring we keep that rage alive, and the memories alive.

Yet another reason this work is high stakes is because of the nature of the records and the stories that they tell. Sex work is criminalized - this means that people do not always want to be known. I found this to be the hardest part of the project - protecting the identity of people who are no longer in community. How should we do that? This was mainly an issue with photos - when the photos were taken in the 1990s and early 2000s, people didn't think through the implications of how information lingers on the Internet. Today, with social media, people are more conscious that photos are shared and remain online forever, so there is more consent and engagement around photo taking and sharing - and there is much more creativity in the ways that collectives and organizations use images, art, and other creative ways that maintain confi-

dentiality. But in earlier years when people snapped cameras, the images could not travel as quickly or as widespread. So how do we keep those photos and share sex worker stories without putting people who have left the industry at risk?

Along the same lines, we need to decide what records to keep private to the organization and what to make public, and in what ways they will be used by the organization. All of this feels high stakes to the people working on this project. Because people come and go so often it's only a few of us in the organization who hold the historical knowledge and make all of these decisions. That also impacts how the history is told.

Question 3. How are good relationships on the project maintained? What else do you want researchers to learn from this panel?

This kind of project requires trust - from both the people collecting the stories and the people telling the stories. Archives can be used or manipulated to tell any story, so the people who tell the stories need to understand the importance of those stories and maintain the intention of how the stories were collected. As I mentioned, sex workers' stories are so often co-opted and used to tell a different story of immorality and exploitation. Sex workers have to work so hard to tell their stories the way they want them to be told - stories of resilience, stories of violence, of criminalization, and of hardships within their full context. So, we need people doing this archival work who are willing to hear the stories that we have to tell, and not hear them through their own lens, but really hear what we are telling them so that they can understand and appreciate the real story. It means letting community members and people whose archives one is collecting, guide the archival process, not the other way around.

Another related challenge is that we need researchers and archivists to work on community timelines, not the other way around. Organizations that are "by and for" sex workers are often inundated with work, responding to community needs. The Sex Work Database project is amazing, but it may not fall within the priority needs of communities and community organizations that are so often addressing urgent, front-line needs - so it has taken time to put all of this together. Researchers, academics, and archivists need to have patience and enjoy the process.

Academic partner - Shawna Ferris is an associate professor and program coordinator in Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Manitoba

Question 1: What are your ethical and academic responsibilities on the project?

My responses to questions like this one have evolved as we have moved through the project. I initially came to the project from a place of panic. What does it mean when sex

work activist records and their associated radical social justice histories go away? I thought if I could just find a way to help preserve these records and histories, then researchers would be able to do research on these groups, and students would be able to learn from these groups and their many actions and initiatives. I worried that if we couldn't find a way to keep all of these records, then the knowledge and lessons would be lost.

Over the years, my approach has shifted as I have come to understand more deeply that while activists want others to learn from their records, the SWD collections are for sex work activists first and foremost and that they must be carefully developed with these community needs, concerns, and access requirements in mind. I have also come to accept that we cannot, in fact, have or save everything. Records, historically and in the present, have to be curated in ways that value the knowledge they contain, yes, but they also have to be curated to protect the people who did, or who are doing the actions and who produced and/or are producing the knowledge. Not all records and not all lessons can be passed along; some histories have to be allowed to go away. Danielle and I wrote about this in *Feminist Media Studies* in 2016: we called this process of selective record curation “strategic ephemerality” (Ferris & Allard, 2016).

I have also learned alongside Danielle, Amy, Jenn, and our various contributors to the Sex Work Activist Histories Project that it matters who decides what to keep and who tells what (hi)stories about a particular group or set of actions. What is important to one person might not be important to another, so folks may not always agree, and I can give an opinion that folks may or may not value. I do not have to be silent in these discussions, but I do have a responsibility to encourage folks to make their own choices, and I have to support the choices they make.

Question 2: What makes this risky or high-stakes record-keeping for you? AND Question 3: How do you maintain good relationships, and what have you learned on the project that your academic training didn't teach you?

I am going to answer questions two and three together. What makes this work difficult for me, in addition to the details I already shared, are the many feelings associated with this work. To be clear, I teach and research in Women's and Gender Studies, and feminist research and pedagogy require both intellectual and emotional presence. And so I really did not expect the actual work of record collecting on-site with sex work activist groups to be difficult. I expected the days to be busy, for sure—as both an academic and a parent, I am used to being busy—and I expected some excitement as we combed through records of activism that have had such major impacts nationally and globally in the struggle for sex worker rights. So, no big deal, right? Wrong.

I remember being surprised at how utterly exhausted I felt

at the end of a day of in-person record collecting. I have come to understand that the exhaustion reflects the high-stakes nature of the work we are doing. Different—sometimes quite heavy—emotions are attached to and experienced alongside many activist records. Obviously, my emotional responses differ in degree from those of the activists whose actions and memories are attached to these records. But early in the project, I started to feel increasing care and concern about the work we were doing: I worried—What if we get this wrong? What if we screw this up?

Fortunately, we work closely with sex work activists themselves. This has resulted in my learning to trust their processes, and this trust helps to alleviate my concerns about getting things wrong. I have learned that if we follow the lead of activists themselves, and if we maintain good relationships with them; if we are accountable to them in all decision-making, then we can, in turn, accept the trust they have in us, and it will be alright. It will be excellent, even. What this has looked like to date:

- We published a book with chapters from activists across the country, but we did so by following a timeline that worked for activists, not academics and our often ‘fast-tracked’ institutional deadlines. Amy and I write about this in the introduction to our edited collection *Sex Work Activism in Canada* (2019).
- After years of trying to make ‘out of the box’ digital archiving software work for the Sex Work Database, we finally decided to develop a custom, community-friendly (instead of institution-friendly) platform based on the stated needs of the groups and individuals donating records to this collection. This is, we have learned, the only way to ensure that groups and individuals who donate records to SWD can decide what goes into the collection, how the collections will be organized and connected, and how SWD will be accessed and used.

As the previous discussion begins to make clear, record collecting for SWAHP, especially for SWD, is very intimate. It's almost like we go through folks' underwear drawers. I have realized how important it is to think very carefully about what it means to do this work and to create space for a complex array of emotions, both those of the activists with whom we are working and the emotions of our research team members.

Which is to say, we have learned to make space for the care work involved in the witnessing and receiving of complex histories. And, as archivist Carmen Miedema (University of Manitoba doctoral student in Indigenous Studies) made clear in a project-adjacent presentation (Ladner et al., 2021), we have to recognize that records live through this work. They are not just words or images; they live when all of us see, touch, talk about, and remember them. And all of us either retain or form relationships with them during the organizing and collection processes. Through the work all of us do on

this project, the records are, or they become, the people, the actions, the victories, and the losses they evoke. They are, or they become, love, rage, hope, joy, desolation, laughter, community, and social justice. They are both the achievement of social justice and the desire for it.

Academic partner - Danielle Allard is an associate professor at the School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta

Question 1: What are your ethical and academic responsibilities on the project?

My role on the project is as the archives lead. My academic background is in information studies. I have learned archival skills and practices on the job. I'm also an associate professor of information and archival studies, and my work on the project informs what I teach archival students. Although I don't talk about it at length here, learning ethical community archival practice and sharing that knowledge with students is a very important outcome or academic responsibility of this work for me. I am really grateful to my SWAHP colleagues for teaching me so much about how to work with sex work communities in a community-driven way.

I work with community partners to translate archival principles and practices into practices that work for sex work communities and activist archiving. I bring a very specific set of technical and practical knowledge and archival practice to the team. My technical knowledge is important to get many things done on the project but it's secondary to the community ways of knowing and doing that Amy and Jenn have highlighted. Acknowledging that I'm here to offer archival support as needed to move the project forward is how I orient myself ethically on the project.

Question 2: What makes this risky or high-stakes record-keeping for you?

I think it's fair to call this 'high stakes' record keeping for me, too, though I would argue that the stakes for me are different and also lower. They are personal but also professional. In terms of the personal, for example, I recognize that because the histories being framed and recorded are not mine, I may not experience the more difficult emotions associated with SWAHP. At the same time, I have learned to prepare myself emotionally for the responsibilities of witnessing/receiving complicated histories. Hearing the stories of sex work activism and learning about the smart, creative, and often artistic movement-driven actions undertaken by sex work activists is always wonderful and sometimes difficult to hear. It is so special to receive the stories and learn the histories of sex work activist organizations. I accept these stories as the gift that they are, but they can also be hard to hear and sometimes difficult for the storyteller to share. As Shawna also said, I have learned to anticipate and make room

for my own and others' affective and emotional responses to this work. I'm really pleased to see that folks in my line of work, archival and information studies, are beginning to think through the impacts of affect and emotions on creators and users of archives as well as those who do archiving and recordkeeping (Caswell & Cifor, 2016; Sloan, Vanderfluit, & Douglas, 2019; Wright & Laurent, 2021).

Question 3: How are good relationships on the project maintained? What else have you learned on the project that your academic training didn't teach you?

I maintain good relationships by being a good listener and trying to be a good translator between archival concepts and community knowledge and needs. I don't assume that I know how all things should be done, even those archival things for which I might be considered "the expert". I don't assume that I understand others' experiences. But I listen hard. I believe what community members tell me. And I work together with project partners to apply what might be useful from archival practice into this community archiving context.

Put another way, I like to think that we do what needs to be done. I think that if you want to build trusting relationships with communities, you need to demonstrate that you are there to do what they need to get done. This might not align with your own immediate priorities. I will share an example. When we travelled on a week-long trip to another city to digitize the organizational records of a sex work activist group, I walked into a board room full of 25 years of unorganized records. I did not digitize one thing that week. Our team did do a lot of digitizing, but I spent the whole time helping the group sort through and organize their records. It was what needed to be done. And it was incredibly useful to the group. It wasn't what I thought that I went there to do, but it was the best thing I could do.

As with other community archives, because this project focuses on preserving histories in ways that matter to their creators, foundational and traditional archival concepts are revisited if/when they don't serve the goals of the project. Opening up and questioning these definitions and practices can feel risky especially if you are trying to prove that you are a "good archivist" in contexts such as at academic conferences or in publications. But care and trust is expressed as belief in, attention to, and working together with sex work activist groups to operationalize the decriminalization community politics that inform the Sex Work Database even when - and maybe even especially when - they contradict traditional archival ways of knowing and doing.

Academic partner - Micheline Hughes is an Indigenous Initiatives Educator at the Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning at the University of Manitoba. She was a graduate research assistant on SWAHP and PhD candidate in Indigenous Studies at the University of Manitoba, at the time of presentation

Question 1: What are your ethical and academic responsibilities on the project?

So much of the answers to these questions are informed by my positionality, who I am in the world and how I move through it. I have been taught that sharing who I am and where I come from is an important responsibility, so I will first do that: I grew up in Ktaqmkuk on the unceded lands of the Mi'kmaw Nation. My mother's side of my family is Scottish, and my father's side is Irish and Wampanoag. In addition to these relationships, I also have close familial relationships with members of Mi'kmaw Nation. My responsibilities are informed by where I come from and what values are required to maintain good relationships.

Relationality and accountability are central to how I strive to be in good relationship. This applies to both my personal and professional life. In the context of SWAHP, I worked as a Senior Research Assistant for years, and during this time, I considered how I could be in good relationship with the other members of the team, the communities with whom we worked, and also the records themselves. This is a shift from what is typically seen in Western academic practices. Of course, Western academia is now being pushed to consider the voices of community, but I think there continues to be a need to recognize that we also have responsibilities to the records or stories with which we work. We have a responsibility to contextualize these records because they do not exist in a vacuum. Practically, this may mean representing records in ways that minimally echo how community understands them. This might mean ensuring, as much as we are able to, that tags are representative of the languages communities use. Amy and I have spent countless hours discussing what language should appear in tags lists and also which tags are most appropriate for each record. This is both a relational and ethical responsibility. Without this granular work and thoughtful consideration, I cannot be in good relationships with the records.

Question 2: What makes this risky or high-stakes record-keeping for you?

Managing the tensions between what Western academia demands and what accountable relationships look like can often be high stakes. In my field of Indigenous Studies, we recognize that OCAP® (FNIGC, 2023), is a minimum standard of care that stakeholders or stewards of community knowledge should be afforded. But this is not always recognized by Western Research Ethics Boards. SWAHP wants

sex work communities to be able to make decisions for their own records. Part of these protections include record storage practices. SWAHP keeps community records on a private server that is not owned by any academic institution. A story I love that reflects SWAHP's dedication to this added protection is, years ago, a community member asked Shawna what she would do if her university job was ever threatened. Shawna responded that she would grab the data and run. This demonstrates a couple of things: this community member was distrustful of the institution, and it was important that their histories remained outside of the control of the institution. It also demonstrates SWAHP's dedication to remaining in good relationship with the records and communities.

Question 3: How are good relationships on the project maintained? What else have you learned on the project that your academic training didn't teach you?

Part of the way that I strive to maintain good relationships is to first understand what good relationships are. For me, good relationships are open, reciprocal, respectful, and acknowledge the obligations we have to each other. In part, this means being a good guest when you have been invited into community spaces. At the outset, I had some concerns about what being a good guest meant in sex work activist communities because my background and training are in Indigenous Studies. If I was headed into a Mi'kmaw community, I know certain protocols I should take to be a good guest; for instance, I would typically bring tobacco and banana bread. You should never enter a relationship empty-handed or without recognizing the time or expertise you are asking of someone. So, in this case, I considered what I understood being a good guest meant and followed Amy's, Shawna's, and Danielle's lead. I, of course, found that some things about being a good guest are similar; you don't enter community spaces empty-handed or with a plan that is so strict it cannot change to meet the present needs of community, you pay people for their time, you feed people, and you position yourself as a learner (Absolon 2011) who is there to simultaneously support community wishes and learn from these knowledge holders. There are no rules that are universally applicable, but the guiding goal of being a good guest and being a good learner means coming up with solutions that both honour archival records and the wishes of community. For instance, if a community wants a photo in the archive but there is someone in the photo who is not "out" as a sex worker, we ask: how can we preserve this photo and also honour the wishes of that particular community member? Our answer might be that the photo is kept private or to blur or crop the image. Maintaining good relationships requires working with communities to come up with solutions to these situations.

Discussion

The conversations above point to complex working relationships that are shaped by the personal, professional, and political high stakes of project members' distinct and intersecting archival and sex work activism priorities. We employ the concept of high-stakes recordkeeping to centre both the difficult and traumatic and the beautiful, joyful, and meaningful, to centre our relationships with communities and each other, and to acknowledge the ever-present backdrop of urgent social liberation and human rights for sex workers. Amy Lebovitch and Jenn Clamen, the non-academic sex work activist group representatives in this panel discussion, consider and discuss both their activist groups' and individual responsibilities and accountabilities to the project. They feel a great deal of responsibility to reflect and remember a broad range of diversity within the sex work movements as well as its ongoing and impactful resistance efforts. This is amplified because these stories are rarely found elsewhere and are not accompanied by their important context.

They also emphasize that the context is high-stakes because of considerations around personal legacies; because many activists' personal lives and experiences—some of which are secret, private, violent, or intertwined with others' lives and experiences they do not have permission to tell or record—are connected with group records and histories. As stewards of community memory, community partners feel a great responsibility to be accountable to their communities. These pressures go beyond being “good”, accurate, or thorough archivists and are deeply personal, emerging from community partners' deep embeddedness and ethical accountability to their communities.

On the other hand, contributors often feel a strong sense of pride at seeing the depth of history and significant labour, recordkeeping and otherwise, that has gone into organizing for their own rights. Re-telling and recording histories can therefore be associated with joy, pride, or exhilaration, as well as trauma, mourning, anger, and frustration. Community partners emphasize how SWAHP work requires a range of expertise and labour, including significant emotional labour, on the part of activists.

The context is also high stakes because of the possibility that SWAHP might be the only place or time that their histories are recorded and/or formally recognized - particularly alongside other collectives of sex workers as they are in SWD - since community groups may not have the pre-existing funding or infrastructure to do this work alone. In order to ensure the work gets done, sex work activist group representatives sometimes feel pressure to acquiesce to academic timelines, frameworks, and expectations that do not align with their own goals. Jenn Clamen stresses that work should be done on community timelines. Amy Lebovitch highlights how short-term funding models don't accommodate community-led projects that often proceed more slowly. Both emphasize

that communities need to be key decision-makers in projects from the beginning, their knowledge is respected and privileged.

The academic contributors in this discussion, Shawna Ferris, Danielle Allard, and Micheline Hughes, each consider and discuss their academic and ethical responsibilities within each of the disciplines from which they come. For some of the reasons identified by the non-academic contributors, the context is also high stakes politically, emotionally, academically, and historically for SWAHP academics. These contributors focus on the ethics of doing ostensibly academic labour and archival practice with and for groups to whom they are outsiders but with whom they consistently work to maintain good relationships. The academics also examine the emotional labour of SWAHP recordkeeping—labour for which academic training does not prepare researchers or LIS practitioners. Recognizing that because the histories being framed and recorded are not theirs, academic team members don't always experience the more difficult emotions associated with SWAHP. They have learned that they must nonetheless prepare themselves emotionally for the responsibilities of witnessing/receiving complicated histories. Contrary to traditional education about LIS and archival practice, contributors argue that they have also learned to anticipate and make room for their own and others' affective responses to SWAHP activities.

Academic contributors also explore how this work requires them to open up their definitions of what is a record, what is an archives, and what is a best practice as they discuss and prioritize the understanding of these concepts with non-academic stakeholders. For example, Micheline Hughes discusses the careful community-led process of developing a tagging-controlled vocabulary in SWD. As with other community archives, because this project focuses on preserving histories in ways that matter to their creators, foundational and traditional archival concepts are revisited if/when they don't serve the goals of the project. Opening up and questioning these definitions and practices can feel academically risky. We must also acknowledge, however, that the risks are not equivalent to the risks that non-academic contributors face as they work to preserve and tell their own histories.

Working under the specific high-stakes conditions of SWAHP requires strong and ethical partnerships that are underpinned by our accountability to each other and our various affiliations. As all of the comments made by SWAHP contributors demonstrate, remaining in good relations with each other and community stakeholders on this project is itself a high-stakes activity. Conversely, the high stakes of the project shape and direct how to be in good relations with each other. Put another way, and as we have said elsewhere, if we don't have relationships, we have nothing, no archives, and no records (Ferris et al., 2018).

Applying SWAHP insights across contexts

These conversations between members of SWAHP have resonance for information professionals working within community and activist archiving and radical librarianship contexts. They can also be further extrapolated to community-led and/or community-based participatory research projects (CBPR). Hallmarks of CBPR are that it includes extensive and ongoing community participation in the research project and that it is designed to address specific community issues, as defined by those communities themselves (Anderson & Cidro, 2019; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). The notion of high-stakes recordkeeping is a useful lens to disambiguate how different project members participate extensively in this community-oriented work (in both visible and sometimes invisible ways). It also makes the community-oriented goals of the project very clear, situating them within urgent contexts of high accountability, responsibility, risk, rewards or benefits, and care. Indeed, we have demonstrated that high-stakes projects can have very different tensions and urgencies than traditional archiving and research projects. Fortunately for those of us who are archivists, information professionals, and/or researchers, vulnerable communities have much to teach us about working within these fraught contexts. It is our job to learn from them.

All project members identified strategies to foster and maintain good relations in community archiving and sex work activism contexts. We thus conclude by surfacing and highlighting several ways that academics, information professionals, and archivists might maintain good relations in their own community-led projects. We reiterate that these suggestions are not “best practices”. They need to be customized and taken up in conversation with the communities with whom you work. Most importantly, they should be the beginning rather than the end of this conversation. In the spirit of further opening up these conversations, here are some basic principles directed towards researchers and information professionals (including librarians and archivists) interested in community-led projects that may serve other community-led archiving and research contexts well:

- Pay people well for their time. Create reasonable project goals that account for the costs of paying community members for all of the work that they do.
- Work on community timelines. Create reasonable project timelines that account for the considerable amount of time it takes to work in a deeply collaborative manner.
- Be a good guest when you have been invited into community spaces. This often includes bringing food and feeding people, very community oriented and delicious activities.
- Advocate for communities in your organization and work to use the power of the academy and archives to

meet community wants, needs, and goals. Traditional archives and universities are not designed to meet the needs of vulnerable communities. Considerable deliberate effort and advocacy are therefore required by researchers and information professionals to make these institutions legible, useful, and relevant to extremely marginalized communities.

- Preserve relationships first.
- Meet community needs first.
- Be non-judgemental and listen carefully.
- Trust and believe community knowledge. Position yourself as a learner.
- Make space for different ways of understanding and approaching issues.
- Make space for emotions. High-stakes contexts generate many types of feelings for all folks working within these contexts. This needs to be paid attention to and acknowledged.

In addition to the brief set of principles outlined above, we would remind researchers and information professionals interested in engaging in community-led research and archival practice to remain in conversation with the communities with whom they work. These are long and evolving dialogues.

Conclusion

This article captures the distinct voices and perspectives of both community activists and academic team members working on SWAHP (though these categories are not mutually exclusive on this project and elsewhere). Although valuable words of advice are contained within, this article is not intended to be a blueprint for action. Instead, it offers a flexible definition of high-stakes recordkeeping and provides nuanced insight into how diverse project perspectives shape working together in a high-stakes and high-care recordkeeping context. The sex work activist community members that have contributed to this article have a long history of participating in academic settings and working alongside academics to improve the research, journalism, cultural heritage, and social narratives that are created about them and often without them. We offered this panel discussion at the CAIS/ACSI conference, and we reiterate it among these pages because we believe it has significant value for LIS and archival researchers, practitioners, and educators engaging in, speaking to, and teaching about community-led research and archival practice. We wish to generate honest discussion that can make visible the high stakes of this work as well as the bridges that must be built in order to work together on SWAHP and to be accountable to each other and our various affiliations. More broadly, this work aligns with our shared commitments to re-imagine cultural heritage and information research and institutional contexts that are supportive of rather than harmful to sex workers and sex work activism.

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