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Book review:

‘I can’t play God, you know’

Ethical dilemmas faced by archivists

Grönroos, I. (2025). “I Can't Play God, You Know”. Ethical Dilemmas that Archivists Face in the Assessment of Records from Social and Psychiatric Care. Doctoral thesis. Skrifter utgivna vid institutionen för ABM vid Uppsala universitet 11. 209 pp. Uppsala: Department of ALM, Uppsala University. ISBN 978-91-506-3082-4.

Introduction

Ida Grönroos successfully defended her PhD dissertation at Uppsala University in February 2025. In “*I Can't Play God, You Know*”: *Ethical Dilemmas that Archivists Face in the Assessment of Records from Social and Psychiatric Care*, Dr Grönroos considers how archivists navigate their dual role as part of societal interventions in people’s lives and as an impartial agent between individual and state. She draws on her own experience as an archivist and her work in a nursing home for people with dementia to understand and interrogate the issues that archivists face in the assessment of records from social and psychiatric care, which sometimes requires them to exercise judgement beyond what is knowable. Her dissertation makes a significant and original contribution to the growing literature on trauma-informed approaches to archives and the treatment of official records that hold highly personal data, such as files relating to medical and out-of-home childcare interventions.

Archivists who work in municipal and regional archives have many tasks and can wield great power, including deciding what records should be preserved for future generations and providing access to the records held in their archives. One important activity is to review closed files to which a user has requested access and to make decisions about whether the file should be accessed at all, in full, or with parts of the file withheld (the technical term is ‘redacted’). Often such files relate to sensitive and personal information about people who were in social or foster care as children or who were in a psychiatric hospital or under medical supervision. These files may be recent or date back several decades and may relate to the requestor themselves or to their family members. In every case, the files hold highly personal information about citizens: reports, decisions, opinions and information which the state created in order to exercise control over the life of the citizen when they were ill or vulnerable. Such files therefore embody information inequalities between the state and the requestor

or subject of the file. Social workers, medical and health practitioners, foster carers, teachers and others contribute to the creation of the patient file and the care record and these professionals generally have access to the file in order to provide social or medical care to the person. However, can the subject of the social care or psychiatric file have access to this information, if they ask to do so? Or are their information access rights restricted? And what is the role of the archivist in the process of deciding about access to the file? The issue that this dissertation examines is the bureaucratic role of archivists, as agents of the state, in deciding who may have access to information. The dissertation considers how public archives are entangled with societal interventions in people's lives and how archives are perceived as impartial agents between the state and its citizens. It considers how archivists make decisions about access to files, how individual archivists balance the legal rules around disclosure of official records and the ethics of care that they use to navigate decision making about access. Archivists take many issues into account as part of their decision making: privacy, access rights, the ethics of disclosure, vulnerability, and detriment, and the thesis shows that different ethical views may lead to different decisions about access. The gap between the law about disclosure and the practice of decisions about access in particular cases is navigated by archivists, who do their best to make good decisions in impossible situations.

Literature and disciplinary perspectives

As is usual in archival science research, this dissertation draws from a range of disciplinary perspectives, including archival science and information studies, social and management sciences, and philosophy. A key idea is around the nature of bureaucracy, defined in foundational work by Max Weber (1968), who identified a rules-based hierarchical ideal system, where experts make well-documented decisions. This system left little room for human intervention or the exercise of moral and ethical aspects of decision making. Archival scholars Michelle Caswell (2016), Anna Sexton (2023, 2025) and others have argued against this distancing of the bureaucrat as an impartial part of a system, calling for an ethics of care even in bureaucratic decisions.

A useful concept employed in this dissertation is the 'street-level bureaucrat', coined by sociologist Michael Lipsky (2010). This refers to public service workers who make complex daily decisions on matters which directly affect the lives of individual citizens; people such as police, nurses, teachers, and social workers. Grönroos suggests that archivists also ought to be seen as street-level bureaucrats, especially in their current paradigm, defined by archival scholar Terry Cook (2013) as societal mediators and community facilitators. In other words, archivists are now servants of the *citizens* more than they are servants of the *state*, and they should seek to document not only the evidence and actions of the state but also the social values in records that matter to citizens and communities. This requires archivists to be both impartial followers of legal rules around records, but also subjective interpreters of records and their meaning to individuals and communities. Archivists are thus expected to span the gap between law and ethics.

This dilemma has sometimes been characterised as a move towards the feminization of archival work, a move from masculine, legalistic ethics towards a feminist ethics of care. Dilemmas can cause stress and there is emerging scholarly work on grief and emotion by Jennifer Douglas and others (2022), Cheryl Regehr, Duff et al (2023), and on trauma informed approaches to archives by Nicola Laurent and Kirsten Wright (2020) in Australia. Several Swedish archival scholars have considered different aspects of the challenges that archivists face in being state employees, independent professionals, and the human face of state interventions. This dissertation takes some of these arguments further and considers the relationships between the state and the individual, focusing on the discretion that the system allows bureaucrats to exercise. The idea of vulnerability and the need for archivists to assess detriment to individuals, both the requestor and others in the file, make navigating that discretion complicated. Individuals in the care of the state may lack the capacity to act or need

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reciprocity from the archivist, who must take the perspectives of other people into account when making decisions in order to arrive at a fair outcome. Consideration of information inequalities and asymmetries and societal inequities is a recent area of research within the wider topic of archives and power and the social contract, such as work by Anne Gilliland and James Lowry (2020) and Lowry (2019). Grönroos's dissertation suggests that the idea of narrative, that is telling a story about what is and is not recorded, may help the archivist to make decisions and help the requestor to understand both the decision and the information in the file.

Key issues and topics in the dissertation

Important concepts addressed in this dissertation are ethics and privacy. Ethics have been much discussed in archival science in recent years and a shift identified from accountability and rights-based interventions to an affective relationship with citizens based on radical empathy. The interaction of social justice and archival practices is complex. The right to information is argued to enable accountability, transparency and good governance.

Two ethical perspectives are identified as significant to this dissertation topic: first, legal ethics, the ethics of justice, law and the rights of citizens and secondly, the ethics of care towards the person requesting information that is highly personal to them. Much of the analysis hinges on these two frameworks and the balance between them in practice. Since this is a dissertation which is about the issues faced by archivists (rather than by others involved in creating and accessing records), Grönroos has drawn on qualitative data from interviews with 26 Swedish archivists from nine Swedish archives (all pseudonymised), supplemented by 'document ethnography' analysis of some sample care files. She presents a series of chapters which discuss different themes which derive from the data she collected. Grönroos poses two research questions in the dissertation. 1: how do the ethical questions which emerge in the data affect the focus of the archivists's work and the results of the assessments of files for access and 2: how do these ethical perspectives relate to the tasks which archivists carry out and their professional roles?

After the Introduction, Chapter 2 discusses bureaucratic narratives and the concepts of legal ethics and the ethics of care. This chapter considers the nature of care files, which are narratives constructed by social workers, medical practitioners and others, but which generally lack the voice of the subject of the file, i.e. the child or patient themselves. It considers whose story or narrative is captured in the file and who is entitled to read it. Care files are also often collective and multi-generational and contain many views and fractured stories. As Grönroos notes, the job of the archivist is not to give people peace of mind but to give them the information they are legally entitled to.

Chapter 3 focuses on the professional context for archival work. How do archivists do their work in practice? This chapter makes the point that 'document work' is not faceless bureaucracy but is work done by individual human archivists, so their private views and their public tasks come together in decision making, not always harmoniously. Archivists, even though they are state officials, need to bring themselves to their professional work in order to act with care and empathy. This chapter discusses a number of related ideas including trust. Care leavers and patients trust the state with their personal information and vulnerability, but a council may give a rather impersonal official response to their request for data. The archivist is a significant human mediator in the interaction.

Chapter 4 outlines the legislative context, the words and the law. Here Grönroos distinguishes between the role of the archivists, who make initial decisions about access to the file, and of the lawyers, who frame the basis for any appeals over access or redaction. The chapter considers some examples such as Britta's case where she wanted access to social service files for her parents and siblings in order to help her to understand what had happened in her childhood, but as the

information belonged to other people, her request was refused twice, leaving her resentful of the council's behaviour. Her appeal was a legal right but in human and emotional terms it made things worse.

Chapter 5 focuses on privacy and the idea of detriment and how these can be assessed by different professionals. The capacity to define and control one's own data imposes obligations on others. The idea of privacy is multi-faceted and to give one person access to data may harm the rights of another person. When assessing files which document state intervention into the private sphere of the family, archivists have to mediate between the privacy rights of different members of a family and decide what individuals have a right to know.

Chapter 6 considers the rights of people who have died. Swedish law says that a dead person should be left in peace and that their will should be respected, even if that means that a living person is denied access. Again, archivists have to judge between detriment to the deceased and to the (living) requestor.

Chapter 7 presents recordkeeping and archival practices as forms of care. In this chapter, Grönroos considers power inequalities (I might extend this to information inequalities) between the archivist and the requestor. Her research has shown that some archivists employ a legalistic ethic in seeking to treat citizens equally under the law, while others might lean towards a care ethic in seeking to give as much help as possible while obeying the law. If archivists employ an ethic of care, does that make their decisions more arbitrary because it is more personal? Is it more honest to accept that records are a means of surveillance and control, and that decisions should be more purely legalistic? Archivists are professionals and have to exercise their professional judgement as best they can in each case.

This dissertation presents many interesting and complex issues, none of which has a simple or single answer. It shows us the power that archivists have not only over records but over people, and the need for archivists to judge difficult questions and make decisions. There are lots of ideas here about ways in which the current education of archivists in Sweden could develop to better prepare archivists for access and review work. Grönroos concludes that often there is no clear right decision, and that while this makes the work of archivists in deciding about access very difficult, nevertheless, archivists are well placed to try and balance the views of jurists, social workers and medical professionals, operating at the intersection of the individual and the state, past and present, the living and the dead, care and control.

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