

CONNECTINGHISTORIES

Learning Package

Introduction

to Archives as Social Knowledge

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This learning package provides an introduction for social science researchers to the use of archives. Social scientists tend to get little training in the use of archival sources, partly because much social research is concerned with generating data in the form of interviews, surveys, ethnographic studies and so on. This is a pity. Archives are a rich and unique source of data about the social world and, although of necessity they are products of what people have done in the past, they can be revealing of the present in all manner of ways. Moreover, as this package hopes to demonstrate, the general principles involved in handling documents are not significantly different from those involved in any other area of social research.

However, it is the case that the use of archives and other documentary sources raises a number of important issues to do with, amongst other things, the relationship between history and sociology, and the sorts of knowledge that may be obtained from documents and texts. This means, as John Scott, a sociologist, has pointed out, that 'the specific features of documentary sources do require consideration of their distinguishing features and the particular techniques needed to handle them' (Scott 1990:1).

The learning package is structured to enable you to explore these features and techniques. In the first part of the package *Archives as Social Knowledge*, you will be introduced to a diverse range of archival materials (from flyers and play bills to photographs and burial registers) and invited to consider the difficulties of using them as sources of knowledge about the social world. These difficulties are both practical (such as issues of copyright, legibility and fragility) and methodological (such as issues of authenticity, interpretation, credibility and meaning). The second part of the package *A Case Study of Civil Dissent in Birmingham* uses archive materials about events in Handsworth in 1985 and the Priestley Riots 1791 to explore contemporary concerns about social order. As with the first part of the resource, the emphasis will be on using archives as a tool for social research.

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