

Lisa Olson, Jordan Audas, Grace Bourret, Kendell Fitzgerald

Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

Ana Roeschley

Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, United States of America

Philippe Mongeon

Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

Is Archival Scholarship for Everybody? A Bibliometric Analysis of Gender and Knowledge Production in the Archival Field, 1981 - 2019

Abstract

Analyzing over 7000 academic journal articles spanning four decades, this research uses bibliometric methods to assess the hypothesis that the archival field is a feminized discipline. First, an explanation of our dataset is presented, followed by the results of the proportion of men and women amongst the authors for which we were able to assign a perceived gender. This analysis shows a gradual rise of female-perceived authorship. We then compare these results to the differences in citations between papers with female and male first authors, which shows no clear trend.

Introduction

Shifts in the demographics of North American archivists in recent decades bring forth questions regarding gender, archival practice, and their connections to archival scholarship. Orchard et al. (2019) argue that, historically, the archives were an extension of the discipline of history and were therefore male dominated; the authors assert that it is not until its association with the library science field, relatively late in its history, that the archives began to be feminized. This assertion seems to agree with the data collected from the Society of American Archivists by Michele F. Pacifico (1987) who notes a very gradual increase of female participation from 1936 to 1972. By 1998, a survey of Canadian archivists showed 59.3% participation of female identified archivists (Craig, 2000). The Society of American Archivists' 2004 A*CENSUS survey findings found even more striking changes regarding the gender demographics of professional archivists in the United States:

One of the most remarkable findings of the A*CENSUS is the gender shift that has occurred in the last half century. With 65% female respondents and 35% male (and 1% who chose not to respond to this question), this represents a reversal of the profession's profile in 1956 when SAA members were surveyed by Ernst Posner. While women outnumber men in all employment sectors, their predominance is less common in government settings and more common in nonprofit settings and among self-employed workers (Society of American Archivists, 2004, p.333-335).

While the gender shift among professional archivists indicates that more women are participating in archival practice, it is unclear if there has been a similar shift in archival scholarship. Michelle Caswell (2019) describes the scholarly literature on archival practice and theory as a canon that is “written almost exclusively by white men working for government archives” (p. 5). While not all professional archivists are expected to produce research, a lack of representation of the majority of the profession in the literature is noteworthy as archival scholarship and theory are meant to directly influence archival practice.

In addition to the shifts in archivist demographics, there are other reasons for the study of gender in archival literature. Terry Cook (2007) notes that, until the 1980s, Canadian archivists proudly referred to themselves as “the handmaidens of history” (p. 170). The use of this term is not explicitly connected to gender of archivists themselves, rather Cook theorizes that this strikingly gendered language is directly linked to the way in which archivists are expected to be passive servants to the researcher. Nevertheless, the invocation of the handmaiden brings forth an imagined feminized archivist. Furthermore, Michelle Caswell (2016), building on the idea that archival studies is feminized, argues that this causes, either consciously or unconsciously, interdisciplinary failings. Specifically, Caswell notes the failure of humanities scholars to interact and engage with archival scholarship. Caswell makes these arguments from her own experience, poignantly recalling a personal anecdote where a well-known humanities scholar expressed the belief that “humanities-has-theory archives-have-practice” (para. 27). The insinuation being that archivists and archival scholars simply perform labour whereas humanities scholars perform something greater.

Are archival science and scholarship, then, truly a feminized discipline? Using all the papers published in archival journals indexed in Web of Science, Dimensions, and Microsoft Academic, this research proposes to use bibliometric methods to shed light on this question, as a starting point for further study. Further analyzing the dataset will reveal the total amount of archival studies work cited in the humanities discipline, whether the gender presentation of the humanities scholar influences their use of archival studies, and whether Caswell’s hypothesis is applicable to other disciplines in academia, like history.

Research objectives

Using bibliometric methods this work-in-progress aims to provide empirical insights on the perceived gender of participants in the production of knowledge in the field of archives over the last four decades. It is, to our knowledge, the first attempt to use bibliometrics to study the field of archives from a gender perspective.

Data and methods

While the field of archival studies is in many traditions considered a social science, the field may also, at least partly, be situated in the realm of the arts and humanities, where the epistemic culture tends to favour the dissemination of research using non-article formats such as books. This may pose a limitation to the use of bibliometric methods to study the archival field, since Arts and Humanities journals (and to a lesser extent social sciences journals) have lower coverage than natural and biomedical science in the main bibliometric databases such as the Web

of Science and Scopus (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). In this work-in-progress paper, we mitigated this data scarcity issue by combining multiple data sources: the Web of Science (WoS), Microsoft Academic Graph (MAG), Dimensions, CrossRef and Library and Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA). MAG, Dimensions, and CrossRef have been shown to offer a broader coverage than the Web of Science (Visser, van Eck & Waltman, 2021).

We adopted a journal-based approach to delineate the field. We collected a list of journals in the archival science field, starting with the journals listed on the Publishing in the Archives Profession Blogⁱ, which we searched in the different bibliometric data sources that were mentioned above. Graph, which together covered 46 of the 68 journals in our list, including seven that were not in the Publishing in the Archives Profession Blog. None of the 22 remaining journals were index in the other databases consulted, so no data was lost by limiting our study to the Dimensions and MAG. We did not include the Journal of the Association or Information and Technology or the Journal of Documentation as these journals publish work from different areas of the field and would thus add too much noise to our dataset.

We collected all articles published in these journals as well as all publications either citing or cited by those articles, for a total dataset of 7,247 papers in archival journals cited a total of 4,980 times. We then used GenderCheckerⁱⁱ data to assign a gender to each author in the dataset based on societal perceptions of the gender associated with their first name. We were able to assign a perceived gender to 7,779 of the 11,838 authors, out of which 3,394 (43.6%) were women and 4,385 (56.4%) were men. The missing gender data is either because some names are not associated with a distinct gender expression, or because the full first name is not included in the metadata. This study is also limited in its focus of gender as a binary due to the available data. We recognize, however, that gender is not a binary and it is therefore important to note that while the included authors' names are associated with a certain gender, individual authors' gender expression may not match societal expectations for their names. Additionally, study tools are not equipped to identify the participation of gender nonbinary and gender nonconforming individuals. However, as this study explores perceptions of archives as a feminized field, the analysis of feminine-perceived and masculine-perceived names is appropriate. Our analysis includes only the authors whose name-gender association was identified, and the 4,986 distinct papers of these authors. For the impact analysis, we normalized citations by dividing the number of citations of papers by the average number of citations for all papers published in the same year.

Results and discussion

Academic Journal Articles

Figure 1 presents the total amount of academic journal articles that were used in our research plotted by year from 1981 to 2019.

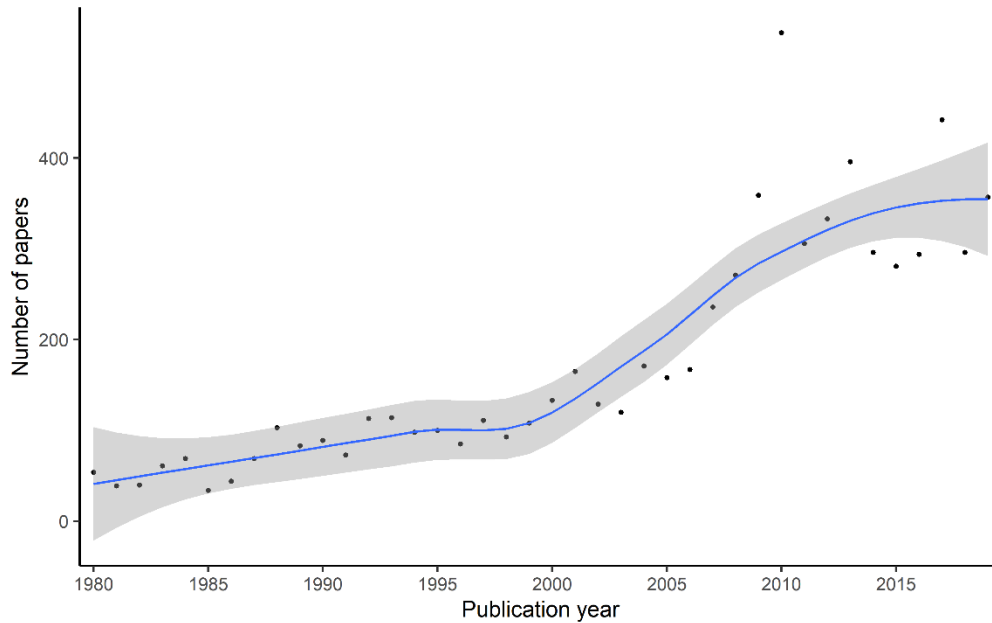


Figure 1. Number of papers (1981-2019)

Figure 1 shows a gradual rise in academic journal articles from 1981 onwards with a sharp increase in the 2000s. This could mark the archival turn’s wider scholarly interest in “the archive.” Another possible explanation for this dramatic increase is the perception of archival science as its own, unique field, separate from other historically related disciplines like history. As the archival field began to build momentum on its own, the participation of academics in scholarly journals increased. Thus, rather than having to rely on and cite research from other fields, archival studies produced more and more of its own work. The trend that some have called the archival turn, brought by the digitalisation of artworks (Hölling, 2015), may also have contributed to the observed rise in archival scholarship starting around the turn of the millennium.

Authorship

Figure 2 presents the proportion of men and women amongst the authors for which we were able to assign a perceived gender.

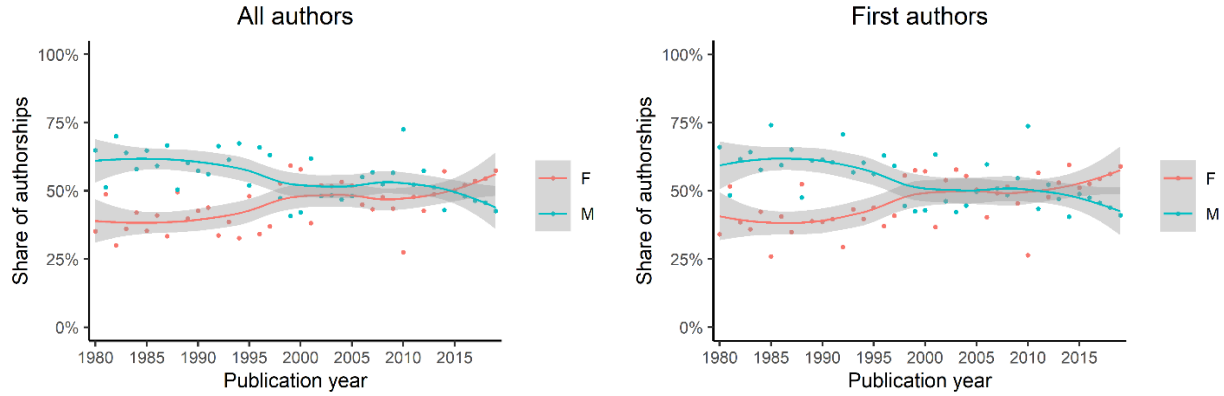


Figure 2. Share of female and male authorships (1981-2019)

Figure 2 shows a gradual rise of female-perceived authorship in the archival field in the past four decades. There is a wide gap in the 1980's and 1990's, near parity in the 2000's, and in the 2010's female-perceived authorship begins to take over male-perceived authorship. When comparing the gender of all authors with the gender of only the first authors, we see a smaller difference in the number of publications by each gender when looking only at the gender of the first author.

Citations

Figure 3 presents the proportion of men and women amongst the cited authors for which we were able to assign a perceived gender.

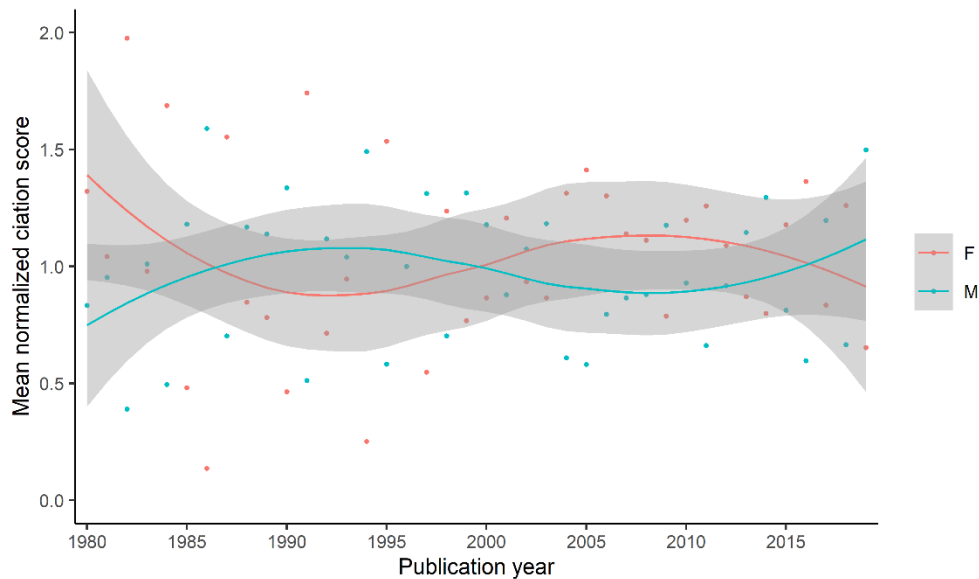


Figure 3. Mean normalized citation score of publication by perceived gender of first author (1981-2019)

Figure 3 shows no clear trend in regard to the perceived gender of the first cited author. This gender parity seems to agree with the assertion made by Lynn et al. (2019) that male academics surpass female academics in “hiring, tenure and promotion, funding and fellowships, earnings, and publications and patents,” but not on the number of citations per publication (p. 518). It is worth noting, however, that, despite the large gap between male-perceived and female-perceived authors in the 1980s and 1990s in figure 2, this figure shows male and female researchers being cited at about the same rate throughout the analyzed years.

Conclusion

In summary, the last four decades of scholarly articles in the archival field shows a gradual rise of female-perceived authorship with a wide gap in the 80s and 90s, near parity in the 2000s, and a takeover in the 2010s. When it comes to differences in citations between papers with female and male first authors, there is no clear trend.

The results presented here are based on the publications published in archival journals indexed in Microsoft Academic and in Dimensions, and they are also limited to the journals that have a somewhat clear focus on archives. In the next stages of this work, we will mitigate these limitations by expanding the data sources to include other databases (WoS, LISTA, and Crossref), and by adding archival work published in the broader LIS journals, such as the Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology, the Journal of Documentation, and the Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science. It will also be interesting to classify our set of archival work in different areas of the field to see if the trends vary between them.

It is also important to note that further limitations exist when attempting to draw conclusions on the general membership of a discipline, in this case archival studies, solely from academic journal articles. There are many professional archivists who do not participate in academic publishing and, therefore, are not analyzed in our dataset. We do not attempt to claim a study of the entire field, but rather a portion of the field reflected in the available academic journal articles.

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ⁱ <https://archivespublishing.com/journals/>

ⁱⁱ <https://genderchecker.com/>