

HOW TO UNDERSTAND COMMUNITY ARCHIVES IN POLAND: RESEARCH CONTEXTS AND CHALLENGES

*Como entender os arquivos comunitários na Polônia: contextos e desafios de
pesquisa*

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ABSTRACT

Community archives are becoming an increasingly important part of the cultural heritage landscape in many parts of the globe, including Poland. However, the scholarship largely concerns countries from the Anglophone milieu. The article, referring primarily to the Polish- and English-language literature and emphasizing the local characteristics of community archives, describes the context related to the Polish research project ‘The impact of independent community archives’ launched in 2023 (ongoing at the time of writing the article). Elements of this context include: the current shift in the archival science discipline in Poland; the Polish community archives landscape; the affective turn in archival studies; local research on community archives; and the formal side of academic career development and scholarly research in Poland. The article also addresses research design and methodology, risks, challenges, and hopes connected with this project.

KEYWORD: Community archives. Independent archives. Archives in Poland. Archival research. Archive impact.

RESUMO

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Os arquivos comunitários estão se tornando uma parte cada vez mais importante do cenário do patrimônio cultural em diversas partes do globo, incluindo a Polônia. No entanto, a produção acadêmica concentra-se majoritariamente em países do meio anglófono. O artigo, referindo-se principalmente à literatura nas línguas polonesa e inglesa e enfatizando as características locais dos arquivos comunitários, descreve o contexto do projeto de pesquisa polonês "O impacto dos arquivos comunitários independentes" (*The impact of independent community archives*), lançado em 2023 (em andamento no momento da redação do artigo). Elementos desse contexto incluem: as mudanças atuais na disciplina de arquivologia na Polônia; o cenário dos arquivos comunitários poloneses; a virada afetiva nos estudos arquivísticos; a pesquisa local sobre arquivos comunitários; o aspecto formal do desenvolvimento da carreira acadêmica e da pesquisa científica na Polônia. O artigo também aborda o desenho e a metodologia da pesquisa, bem como os riscos, desafios e expectativas relacionados a este projeto.

Palavras-chave: Arquivos comunitários. Arquivos independentes. Arquivos na Polônia. Pesquisa arquivística. Impacto do arquivo.

1 INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Aims and scope of the article

Community archives (that is, grassroots/independent archival initiatives) are becoming increasingly important in the cultural heritage landscape in many parts of the globe. They have also recently become an increasingly common topic in the English-language scholarship on archival studies and related fields (Poole, 2020; Welland; Cossham, 2019). However, community archives are present in various parts of the world beyond the Anglophone milieu. Although there are not many publications on the subject, and it is sometimes difficult to find them due to, among other things, the language barrier and differences in terminology, the scholarship already describes community archives in Chile (Andaur Gómez, 2017), Colombia (Giraldo Lopera, 2018), South Korea (Lee, 2015), China (Lian, 2021), Croatia (Gilliland; Štefanac, 2020), Zimbabwe (Bhebhe; Ngoepe, 2023), or Brazil (Alencar, 2026), among others.

Community archives have recently become an increasingly important part of the Polish heritage landscape, as well as the landscape of research in archival science and archival education at universities (Wiśniewska-Drewniak, 2025b). The purpose of this article is to present the contemporary context of research on community archives in Poland from the perspective of an



ongoing (2023-2026) research project titled 'The impact of independent community archives' (also referred to as the IMPACT Project), focusing on archives' social and affective influences. Elements of this context described below include the following: the status of the currently changing archival science discipline in Poland; the recent development of the Polish community archives movement; the affective turn in archival studies; the development of local research on community archives; and the formal side of academic career development. The article also presents a detailed description of the IMPACT Project research design.

As a result, this article is not a traditional journal article presenting research findings. Instead, it is a detailed description, based on an analysis of the literature and referring to the Author's previous research experience, of the context of her team's ongoing research project, the results of which will be presented in other publications². The article is intended not only to highlight archival research taking place outside of the major English-speaking scholarly centers (such as the US, UK, Canada, and Australia) but also to help researchers from less recognised locations with other research traditions, other cultural contexts, different heritage landscapes and perhaps speaking a language other than English, to implement their local contexts into their research designs. I trust that the detailed description of the research project presented below (which goes well beyond the standard description of context, goals, and research methods found in journal articles) will help to decentralise and pluralise the narrative of community archives and embolden researchers of this cultural phenomenon from different parts of the world, demonstrating the importance and complexity of ecosystems in which researchers of archives (not only community archives) work (Gilliland, 2017).

1.2. Community archives in Poland: terminology, history, and characteristics of the movement

Throughout the article, I use the term 'community archive', although it is not equivalent to Polish terminology. The Polish term '*archiwum społeczne*' translates directly as 'social archive', so there is no reference to a community. The word '*społeczny*' (social) in Polish means, among other

² Publications available at the moment of writing this article are: Wiśniewska-Drewniak and Kapąła (2025) and Wiśniewska-Drewniak, Kapąła, Rosa and Siuda (2025; 2026). All results, including field reports and research data are reported on the project website: <https://impact.umk.pl/pages/results/>



things, something relating to society or a part of it, something produced by society and commonly owned, but also something or someone working selflessly for the benefit of some community or society, and a thing organised by some community independently, without the participation of the state (Społeczny, [202-?]). As a result, archives' grassroots, voluntary, civic involvement and initiative and, in cases of some definitions, independence and operating outside of the state are more important aspects in defining community archives in Poland than their relationship with the community, forms of identity or political and social justice motivations.

In Poland, the history of community archives dates back to the 19th century, when Poland, due to foreign interventions, did not exist as an independent country, and the Polish language and identity were suppressed by imposing imperialistic cultures of Russia, Prussia, and Austro-Hungary. In this period (called 'the partition period'), local Polish cultural societies, frequently working undercover or in disguise, worked towards sustaining Polish identity, some using documentary and archival practices to document the Polish community's history, struggle, language, and traditions (Wiśniewska, 2016). Then, individual cases of grass-roots archiving endeavors can be found throughout the 20th century in Poland, with a slight rise in number during the communist period (1945-1990), documenting, for example, the forbidden "Eastern history" (Soviet oppression of Poles) and creating and documenting (illegally and under-cover) historical narratives opposite to one public version of the past accepted by the communists.

Finally, community archives in Poland boomed in the late 20th and early 21st centuries – with the new democratic system introduced in 1990 and the technological digital revolution of the 21st century. So, unlike in the United States (Cifor; Caswell; Migoni; Geraci, 2018) and the United Kingdom (Flinn, 2010), the Polish community archive movement has very little connection with the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s because in that period, Poland was a country under totalitarian rule, with strictly controlled social life and with no freedom of association, nor freedom of speech.

Also, the subject focus of community archives in Poland is different, covering minoritised race-, faith-, and ethnicity-based identities to a small extent due to a significantly different social structure in Poland compared to the US and UK. The most popular type of a community archive is one focused on local identities and histories, the difficult 20th century (especially World War II and



experiences of totalitarianism – Nazism and communism), but also sports history, cultural history, and history of some professions. Archives based on gender/sexuality, minoritised ethnic/national identities, and disabilities are also present, but in relatively small numbers. What most contemporary Polish community archives do is not necessarily radical liberatory archiving aimed at social justice goals (commonly addressed by scholarship in the US) (e.g. Bastian, 2020; Caswell, 2021; Caswell; Cifor; Ramírez, 2016; Cifor; Caswell; Migoni; Geraci, 2018), but rather still filling the gap by documenting people, localities, communities, and topics that public heritage bodies have omitted but also activating histories and traditions that have been forgotten or are endangered, which also includes intangible heritage.

1.3. What ‘archives’? What ‘impacts’?

The research project described here utilises the term ‘independent community archives,’ which is already present in the English-language scholarship (e.g. Caswell; Cifor; Ramírez, 2016; Flinn; Stevens; Shepherd, 2009; Gilliland; Štefanac, 2018). On the one hand, it makes the study easier by excluding initiatives associated with, for example, local community centers or public libraries (both run by local governments). Sometimes, these can be grassroots initiatives that have merged with state or local government bodies, for reasons including their sustainability. However, this bottom-up nature and relationships between the authorities and activists and the nature of their partnerships are difficult to grasp and understand without in-depth studies. And while the topic of relationships and power dynamics in community archives associated with such public bodies is very interesting, the author believes that this is not yet the moment to explore it in Poland. On the other hand, community archives run by non-governmental organisations and informal groups are more radical, free, independent, and the people involved in their activities are less often professionally/financially tied to them. They also have a slightly different legal status in Poland, being part of the non-state archival holdings, according to the Archives Law (Polska, 1983). The use of the term ‘independent community archives,’ therefore, makes the selection of cases in the study easier, and the research data potentially more saturated. However, it should be noted that many initiatives counted in Poland as community archives, such as those described in the database



administered by the Center of Community Archives, are run precisely by public local libraries or municipal cultural centers (Centrum Archiwistyki Społecznej, [202-b]). Those lie outside of the scope of the project.

The project focuses on the impact of independent community archives, which is both an *inward impact* (on community archivists and archive associates and volunteers) and a small-scale *external impact* (on donors and contributors, users/audience, and immediate community). The study concentrates especially on social and affective impact.

According to Brophy (2005, p. 44), an *impact* is

any effect of a service, product or other 'event' on an individual or group. It may be positive or negative; may be what was intended or something entirely different; may result in changed attitudes, behaviors, outputs (i.e., what an individual or group produces during or after interaction with the service); may be short- or long-term; may be critical or trivial.

In studies on the impact of heritage institutions, social impact is understood as “encompassing inclusion or overcoming exclusion of individuals or groups in terms of poverty, and education, race, or disability and may also include issues of health, community safety, employment and education” (Wavell; Baxter; Johnson; Williams, 2002, p. 6). Caswell, Cifor and Ramírez (2016, p. 63) see the social impact of archives especially in “issues surrounding the development of personal and community identity, the preservation of culture, broadening understandings of history, and the positive representation of communities”. Other areas might be the development of skills and attitudes in volunteers, preservation of histories not found elsewhere, promotion of community and local pride, empowerment, and social inclusion, and revitalising endangered traditions (Duff; Caswell, 2020).

Affective (or emotional) impact is even more personal and intangible. As many contemporary researchers, we use the terms *affect* and *emotion(s)* as synonyms, thus referring to a generalised human emotional sphere; a strategy also adopted by Marika Cifor when writing about the introduction of affective theory into archival discourse, where she sees affect as “a culturally, socially and historically constructed category that both encompasses and reaches beyond feelings and emotions” (Cifor, 2016, p. 10).



1.4. Previous studies on (community) archives' impact

Studying the impact of community archives is certainly not new, as it is preceded by studies on the impacts of library services and public archives. Libraries have a particular track record of studying their impact and, for at least a dozen years now, have sought to construct narratives about their place in the modern world in this way (Derfert-Wolf, 2018; Poll, 2018). Many of these studies focus on economic impact or the quantitative representation of findings, and some studies of museums are similar. However, these are certainly less numerous than the output of library services researchers (Murzyn-Kupisz, 2018).

One of the first studies focused on archives impact was the Archival Metrics project (2005-2011), used to assess, among other things, the economic impact of archives and effectiveness of online finding aids, using standardised toolkits. The researchers in this project suggest that archives have a monetary impact on their surroundings by attracting researchers and tourists (Yakel; Duff; Tibbo; Kriesberg; Cushing, 2012). Many examples of archival impact studies focused on educational impact, for example, studies on the impact of archives on undergraduate students, which collectively show the positive impact of introducing archives to these individuals (Daniels; Yakel, 2013; Duff; Cherry, 2008; Krause, 2010).

Particularly important for this project are studies of the impact of community archives, which, although not numerous, already provide some basis for further considerations. These, however, only apply to the UK and the US.

'The impact of community archives' study conducted in 2006-2007 by Community Archives Development Group (UK) used survey data and multiple case study method (with 10 cases studied), showing a range of positive outcomes for individuals and communities, for example: opportunities for lifelong learning and new skills development; engaging all sectors of the society, people of varying ages, experience and ability; improving the 'livability' of an area; empowering communities and encouraging a sense of belonging to a community (Community Archives Development Group, 2007; Flinn, 2010, p. 154).

Describing the US context, Caswell, Cifor, and Ramírez (2016) examined the affective impact of the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) on academic members of this ethnic



community through a series of qualitative interviews. The authors report a phenomenon or a feeling shared by their respondents using the term ‘representational belonging,’ as well as a significant affective response from students of South Asian origin. Interestingly, the issue of the impact of community-based archives is complicated by Gabiola, Brilmyer, Caswell, and Zavala (2022), noting such processes as the opening of old wounds and the eventual re-traumatisation of those who deal with and engage in the community archive (including as contributors and oral history interviewees), as well as the right to forget and be forgotten - as forms of individual and community protection. Both these papers focus on historically marginalised and minoritised US communities, so their context is very specific to the US and might not be easily transferable onto the local Polish understanding of community archives and communities they represent.

2 RATIONALE AND LOCAL CONTEXTS OF THE PROJECT

The IMPACT Project aims to study community archives’ impacts in a cultural setting different than the Anglophone milieu described in the literature, with other histories and motivations of community archives, in a dissimilar legal environment, and with different advocacy organisations and their status. In addition, the study situates itself within an academic discipline at a specific point in its development and is governed by traditions and regulations different from those of archival science in Anglophone countries. This local context, which is crucial to the shape of the project, will be explored in detail below as an important element of the research landscape in Polish archival science.

It is not only in countries such as the UK, US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand that interest in grassroots archives is growing. This is also the case in Poland, as indicated, among other things, by the growing number of community archives; as of May 2026, the database maintained by Poland’s Center of Community Archives lists more than 850 initiatives (Centrum Archiwistyki Społecznej, [202-]b). The very existence of the Center of Community Archives, an advocacy organisation established in 2020 by the KARTA Center Foundation (Poland’s largest community archive) and the Ministry of Culture, and funded by the latter, indicates the state’s interest in supporting this sphere of grassroots cultural heritage activity. Also, the academy is not indifferent



to this area - in recent years, there has been a growing number of conference papers and even whole conferences focused on this phenomenon³. The topic is also appearing more frequently in the courses offered by Polish universities and theses written by students (Wiśniewska-Drewniak, 2025b, p. 125).

2.1. Previous studies on Polish community archives

The body of research on Polish community archives is also slowly growing. However, this is still a sphere that needs further, more profound knowledge and understanding. Already, this contrast between a phenomenon gaining increasing popularity and recognition and the still insufficient number of good quality empirical studies is a reason to take up the subject. Nevertheless, Polish scholarly publications on community archives can be divided into several groups, representing different points of focus and research approaches.

The first group constitutes theoretical analyses of the phenomenon of community archives from the perspective of archival theory and the history of archives. These texts look at community archives as a new element of the heritage landscape and a phenomenon that, although not yet interfering with archival theory in Poland, certainly poses a challenge and another element in the development of archives as memory institutions (e.g. Chorążyczewski, 2015; Czarnota, 2011; Stępnia, 2012).

Another group is made up of texts on the history of community archives - either tentatively taking a collective view of the phenomenon (although there is still no in-depth study of the history of Polish community archives) (Wiśniewska, 2016) or on specific cases, such as the study on the Polish War Archive (1915-1921) (Roman, 2019) and the monograph on the history and activities of the KARTA Center (Gluza, 2012).

The next group is descriptive case studies depicting particular archives' history and contemporary activities, usually written by people associated with them (e.g. Filipczak, 2009; Kowal, 2015; Michałowska, 2015). However, although numerous and published over many years, these

³ For example, the 6th National Archive Symposium in 2024 organized by the Society of Polish Archivists titled 'Family and Community Archives' (Stowarzyszenie Archiwistów Polskich, 2024).



publications are scattered and often difficult to find, as their authors do not usually use the term 'community archive'.

A separate, rich and valuable group of publications are the recent analyses of the characteristics of Polish community archives and their environment, carried out by advocacy initiatives working on behalf of community archives in Poland, that is, by the Observatory of Community Archives of the KARTA Center (2012-2019) and the Center of Community Archives (since 2020) or by experts (especially academics) at the above-mentioned initiatives' request. Among these publications are two manuals for community archivists (Pankowska-Dowgiało, 2023; Ziętał, 2012a) a survey on the needs of community archivists (Kapała; Michałowska, 2020), a diagnosis of sustainability of Polish community archives (Ziętał; Melon, 2023), as well as two comprehensive reports on the state of community archives in Poland, including such topics as qualitative and quantitative analysis of community archives and their collections; the presence of community archives in university research and teaching; Polish diasporic archives; infrastructural facilities and methods of processing community archives collections; government policy toward community archives; and the legal environment of community archives in Poland (Ziętał, 2016; 2017).

Empirical research originating in academia is still a small group of publications in Poland. The earliest attempt was a small survey published in 2003 of grassroots documentation centers for the history of the underground army in Poland during World War II (Minczykowska, 2003). Empirical academic research also includes two research projects that the Author has been conducting on Polish community archives, as described in detail below.

2.2. Contemporary archival research in Poland and its contexts

It is worth noting why Polish academics so rarely undertake empirical research on contemporary community archives, while they quite readily take on analyses of their history, their relationship to archival theory, or their legal environment.

In Poland, as in many European countries, archival science, as an academic discipline, derives from history. Despite the tradition of teaching archival science as part of history dating back to the 1950s, 'Archival studies and records management' appeared as an independent university program



in Poland as late as 2006. It was first opened at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń as part of the Faculty of History and the Institute of History and Archival Science – organisationally in close connection with the discipline of history, which still functions today (Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu, [202-]).

As a result, it is only recently that, among academics (and therefore also archival educators), there are people who graduated in archival science rather than history. This, in turn, also affects study programs, in which issues of historical research dominate the research methodology. The same is true for doctoral studies, since in Poland, it is not possible to have a doctorate in archival science, but only in history with a specialisation in archival science. As a result, Polish research on archives is still dominated by academics with a methodological background in history, but with little preparation in studying contemporary heritage institutions, including archives. Also, archival science university programs so far do very little to prepare graduates to use such research methods as surveys, interviews, or observations⁴.

2.3. 'Community archives in Poland - a multiple case study' (2016-2019)

As mentioned above, community archives boomed in Poland at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, with a notable rise in both the number of archives and interest in them around 2012, which, among others, resulted from advocacy and research initiatives organized by the KARTA Center from Warsaw. In this period (2012-2015), there was still relatively little information about community archives in Poland, despite a growing interest from academia and public heritage institutions, including state archives. In the Author's opinion, judging from numerous conversations and discussions at academic and professional conferences in different parts of Poland, this interest was accompanied by a certain level of mistrust and distance from professional archivists and archival scholars and a lack of understanding about what community archives are, how they operate, what they collect, and what they do with this heritage. The lack of clear definitions and the complicated legal status of community archives did not help either.

⁴ Look at, for example, Steinar Kvale's description of emotional dynamics of research interviews (Kvale, 2004, p. 94, table 5.1).



This atmosphere of mistrust in community archives and hunger for more knowledge about them influenced the design of the previous research project that the Author led. The project titled 'Community archives in Poland - a multiple case study' was funded by the National Science Center between 2016 and 2019 (designed and launched with a pilot study in 2015). It was an exploratory and descriptive study - an easier methodologically, but giving 'hard data', which through a thick description showed what contemporary community archives in Poland were, what their collections were, what activities they undertook, and what their backgrounds and problems were. The data were collected through desk research, observations, and interviews (especially the latter), and the project's crowning publication included complete reports on eight community archives of different characters, ages, sizes, and locations. The description of each archive consisted of such elements as: the archive's history; goals and motivations; characteristics of collections; activities undertaken by the archive; relationships and partners; funding; people involved; collection, preservation, arrangement and description, and access to the materials; problems; plans for the future; and place in the community archives movement (Wiśniewska-Drewniak, 2019).

The thick description of the archives was intended not only to familiarize the Polish archival community with contemporary community archives but also to enable future comparative research in retrospect. This happened when the Center of Community Archives in 2023 conducted a re-examination of three community archives based on that study, to observe the changes (between 2017/2018 and 2023), particularly in terms of archives' infrastructure and sustainability (Melon, 2023, p. 44-46).

In addition to its descriptive purpose, the publication concluding the Author's research project also had a methodological goal, that is, to familiarize Polish researchers with methods of studying contemporary archives empirically and qualitatively, which has borne fruit in recent years in the form of subsequent doctoral theses using a similar strategy, already defended or in the process of being written by Polish scholars (these theses cover the following topics: ethnological research archives, the Polish Museum in Rapperswil in Switzerland, oral history in community archives).

It is worth emphasising another element of the context of the study at the time. It constituted the Author's doctoral dissertation in history (specialization in archival science), so it had



to stick to the formal framework, which meant archives in the narrow sense, i.e., organizations preserving original archival materials that are potential historical sources. The oft-repeated claim in the scholarship that community archives mix the roles of archives, libraries, and museums (e.g. Flinn; Stevens; Shepherd, 2009; Gilliland; Flinn, 2013; Ziętał, 2012b), and the frequent post-custodial approach is also true for Polish community archives. In this case, however, the firm (and rather classic) use of the word 'archive' and the selection of cases having at least partially original materials of an archival value (though broadly perceived) was the result of formal requirements. It worked in favour of the dissertation, as did placing at the center of the case the archive as a collection of information (and not, for example, as an organization/initiative or group of people) (Wiśniewska-Drewniak, 2019, p. 101-102).

At the same time, from the beginning of the Author's research endeavors (that is, from her bachelor's thesis written in 2011-12), the Author was accompanied by the feeling that community archives have a much greater significance, going beyond the sum of the information they hold, and looking at them as collections of materials with historical value does not do justice to this phenomenon.

2.4. Turning towards affect

The impetus for the change in research orientation came from one interview with a community archivist from Gdańsk, Jacek Górski, conducted in January 2018. The interviewee shared his memories and thoughts on his emotional reactions to the creation of the community archive, including the moment that determined his decision to get involved in this initiative, which happened during a meeting dedicated to sharing and discussing old photographs of the Lower Town district:

Well, I pulled out this bundle of photos, we started looking at them, and then, for the first time while looking at these photos, I participated in such a process, a way of reacting to these photos. After that, as Storytellers, we experienced it many times. It was something like: *oh my, I remember this! oh my, this is where my aunt lived! oh my, this is where the tramway still ran back then!* I kind of sat back and showed them these photos, and so it was peculiar for me a little bit, it was cool. It turns out that people have a lot of memories related to such photos, which, as I said, were taken not at all in such a way to evoke such reactions. And that was cool, too; I was happy to be able to show these people some of these places;



I liked their reactions, I liked their approach to it. (...) Well, and then it so happened that I started attending these meetings⁵.

Jacek Górski also talked about the emotions that the publication of one of the alternative printed guides to the district, containing photographs and oral histories collected by the archive, evoked in its creators but also in local residents as audience:

We went in [...], and there were these packages with the guides, with such trembling hands we tore off this packing paper.... We took out these guides and looked at them. And we found that it came out capably, despite the minor mishaps it was a fantastic thing. Well, and this was, now as we say, our first triple child, our triplets, which showed us that thanks to our hard work something tangible came out, something that, when reaching people, evokes such reactions in them that we are simply pleased. And since it was in December, after the New Year we started to get information that people were watching these maps on Christmas, in groups, because as it is during Christmas - a larger family gather. And instead of watching 'Home Alone' they would open these maps, look at these old photos, read these memories. Sometimes it was the memory of a neighbour, a teacher, sometimes of a person completely unknown, but about a place they knew exactly. And such information was coming to us, that: you know, as we sat in the house for two hours, mother got emotional, grandmother [...] trembled when we read it to her. One didn't realize that this had such an impact.

It is worth noting the very emotionally rich phrases used by the interviewee in both statements: *it was cool, I was happy, it came out capably, fantastic thing, our child, we enjoyed it, someone got emotional and trembled*. The interviewee's immense sensitivity, self-reflection, and ability to externalize these emotions led the Author to shift the research orientation toward a more non-materialistic one. It turned out that these affective influences of archival work not only exist (as the Author had previously known) but were also, at least to some extent, accessible to the researcher, as the conversation with Jacek Górski proved.

Another important context that influenced the ongoing project is the affective turn in archival studies, gaining popularity in this period (ca. 2019-2022), as described by Cifor (2016), as well as the research of Caswell, Cifor, and Ramírez (2016) on community archives and their impact. These impulses led the Author to study influences of community archives beyond their informational impact, concentrating on Poland and local contexts and at the same time, still

⁵ Interview with Jacek Górski regarding the *Archive of Opowiadacze Historii Dolnego Miasta w Gdańsku*, conducted by Magdalena Wiśniewska-Drewniak on 13 January 2018 and held at the Archive of the Department of Archival Studies and Records Management (Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland).



producing such a useful thick description of Polish community archives. Thus, the IMPACT Project was born. The project received funding from the National Science Center in Kraków in 2023.

2.5. Research project as a step in academic career

It is worth referring to the 'formal context' within the system in which this project operates. The IMPACT Project is intended to constitute the Author's *habilitation* dissertation. *Habilitation* (Polish: *habilitacja*) is traditionally the next academic level in Poland, higher than the PhD, which is present mainly in some European countries. In a way, it is an additional element between PhD and Full Professorship (Habilitation, [2026]; Wosiek, [202-?]).

As it is with the PhD degree in Poland, it is not possible to earn the *habilitation* degree in archival science, and *habilitation* fellows in this field traditionally earn the degree of 'Doctor with *Habilitation* of Humanities in the discipline of history.' Basing a *habilitation* procedure in history on a series of scholarly articles on contemporary heritage institutions (instead of a traditional history monograph) carries a certain risk. However, as long as archival studies have a strong semi-autonomy in the discipline of history and the appointed reviewers are not too disciplinarily conservative, this should not be an obstacle. The IMPACT Project also constitutes a study of public history, contemporary management and uses of historical sources, and how community archives build a corpus of sources about the past that would not be available to future historians without these archives' interventions (although scholars are not usually the primary audiences for community archives or their primary users). However, from a methodological perspective, the project is far from the classical methods and techniques used by historians (being closest, perhaps, to cultural history and oral history).

3 THE IMPACT PROJECT (2023-2026) - METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The IMPACT Project involves four investigators - the Primary Investigator (PI, Author), the Student Investigator (SI), and two additional investigators, with the PI employed for the entire



duration of the project, the SI during phases 1 and 2, and the additional investigators only during certain periods of phase 2.

The project consists of three phases.

Phase 1 (concluded at the moment of writing this article) aimed at building the theoretical and analytical framework, primarily creating a list of potential impacts of community archives based on two data collection techniques: desk research (literature and earlier interviews) and interviews with experts.

Desk research was based on scholarly literature and past interviews with community archivists. The literature analysed consisted of Polish and foreign publications, assuming as much diversification as possible by going beyond English (we used texts in German, Croatian, Spanish, Portuguese, and French, among others) and going beyond publications on archives, also using studies on the impact of museums and libraries or on volunteering in cultural institutions. Special attention was paid to texts based on empirical data.

Already existing interviews with community archivists analyzed as part of this phase were those from the Author's earlier research project from 2015-2019, as well as interviews conducted by the Center of Community Archives as part of the series 'Community Archivists About Themselves' (Centrum Archiwistyki Społecznej, [202-]a).

The PI and SI also conducted 12 interviews with Polish and international experts in the field of community archives (academics and people engaged in advocacy, some of them with experience as community archivists). Through semi-structured interviews, we collected opinions and ideas on various aspects of the impact of community archives, coming from different parts of the world and people with different experiences (Wiśniewska-Drewniak; Kapała, 2025).

Both research tasks (desk research and expert interviews) added up to a broad list of potential impacts of community archives to support the analysis of empirical data during Phase 2. However, this initial set of codes (potential impacts) was not meant to be a closed catalogue. On the contrary, the analysis of the empirical data from Phase 2 focuses mainly on looking for dissimilarities from what constitutes the potential impacts found in Phase 1, adding new impacts, and merging or splitting already existing codes. The code set will be made available through an open research data repository after Phase 2 is completed.



Phase 2 (ongoing at the time of writing this article) is an empirical study of three selected cases: three community archives currently operating in Poland.

The basic strategy used in the research project is a case study - a conscious, intentional reduction of the object of study in order to gain an in-depth understanding of it (Sztumski, 2005, p. 121; Yin, 2015, p. 47-49). Generally, a case can be, for example, a program, event, activity, process, person or persons (Creswell, 2013, p. 39), groups and organisations (Strumińska-Kutra; Koładkiewicz, 2012, p. 2), projects or communities (Yin, 2015, p. 271). One community archive is a separate case in the project (drawing from PI's experience from her previous study: Wiśniewska-Drewniak, 2019, p. 101-103). The project will comprise 3 cases; such a scope of the study is dictated by the possibilities posed by the funding agency and the maximum duration of one project. It is also related to the intention of conducting in-depth studies focused on specific cases.

Purposive case selection is used to achieve diversity of archives (in terms of their size, focus of the collections, age of the archive). This is a method of case selection already used successfully in field research of community archives (Flinn; Stevens; Shepherd, 2009, p. 75; Wiśniewska-Drewniak, 2019, p. 104-112) and reflects the diversity of the movement of community archives. Easy access to the case and the willingness of the archive to cooperate are also crucial factors.

Data triangulation is achieved by collecting data from a variety of sources through the use of different data collection methods/techniques, i.e., through desk research, interviews, and observations.

Desk research is based on, e.g. scholarly literature, internal reports and other records, finding aids, public records, websites and social media – describing the history and activities of the archive. Desk research is documented through standard means associated with textual content analysis, i.e., through copies, notes, fiches, and bibliographic databases.

Direct, on-site observations accompany each archive visit. In particular, their purpose is to collect data on the characteristics of the collections and how they are managed, the day-to-day archival activities, ways of accessing the collections, archive's infrastructure, and archive's problems and challenges. Observation (usually combined with interviews at the archives' premises) is documented through notes and digital photographs (which may depict examples of archival

materials, the space – archives' premises, or storage of collections). Additionally, photographs are also an important outreach resource and a means of enriching case study reports.

The central data collection technique for each case is qualitative interviews. For every archive, the number of interviews varies from 3 to 8. The first set of interviews is conducted with community archivists – one or more persons who know archive day-to-day operations best and are most engaged in them. Interviews cover archive's history, aims and motivations, collections scope and management (how they collect, process, preserve, and provide access to archival materials), public activities, funding, staffing, challenges (semi-structured part of the interview, based on PI's previous descriptive project), and the archive's impact on archivists (unstructured part of the interview). The second set of interviews is conducted with contributors and archive users/audience (where possible). At this stage, community archivists, as “gate keepers”, suggest potential interviewees. All interviews are documented through digital audio recordings, and all interviewees need to make an informed consent to take part in the project, by signing a written form (where they also decide about anonymization and publishing their interview's transcript online).

The research process for each case study is as follows:

- a) Contacting the archive and obtaining permission to participate in the project.
- b) Desk research – collecting data on the archive before the visit and during the visit and supplemented afterward (based on sources shared by the archivist, e.g. finding aids, internal documentation).
- c) On-site interview(s) with the chief archivist(s). During the visit, the PI also gathers contacts for potential subsequent research participants (donors/contributors, users/audience) based on the archivist's suggestions.
- d) Interviews with subsequent study participants. The nature and number of these depends on the specific case; they may be conducted during the same field visit or subsequent ones or at a distance (if preferred by interviewees).
- e) Preparing data for analysis (description of photographs, transcription of recordings, rewriting and supplementing notes). This task is aided by the SI. Research data (transcripts and photographs), if allowed by the archive and interviewees, is published in an open research data repository (Wiśniewska-Drewniak, 2025c; 2026).

- f) Analysis focused on description. Qualitative coding using a priori codes based on the ‘Community archives in Poland...’ project (2016-2019) to create a detailed description of the community archive (a continuation of the descriptive study).
- g) Preparing a descriptive case report with the following sections: archive’s history; aims and motivations; premises; characteristics of the collections; archive’s outreach activities; cooperations and partners; funding; staff (people associated with the archive); collecting, preservation, processing, and providing access to collections; challenges and problems; plans for the future; place in the community archives movement (Wiśniewska-Drewniak, 2025a; 2025d). Then, all four researchers read the detailed description of the archive – to familiarize themselves with its context.
- h) Analysis focused on the impact. In this stage all four researchers re-read and code all interviews conducted as part of the case, using the list of codes on impact produced in Phase 1. The list of codes is open and successively developed by all investigators. During the coding process, memos are created and new codes are given descriptions. After re-reading and coding the interviews independently, the investigators combine their coding and, through discussion and consensus, develop a final version of the coding (a standardised vocabulary describing archive’s impact) (UCLA Community Archives Lab, 2018). Each case’s impact analysis will then be used for cross-case analysis in Phase 3.

The above listed research tasks are the same for all three cases, which means they are repeated three times during the study.

Phase 3 (not yet commenced) is the collective impact assessment of the examined community archives. In this case, the case study reports and codes describing the archives’ impact will be collectively analysed in search of common and divergent data. It will also be possible to return to the raw data at this stage, if necessary.

As part of this phase, the PI will use pattern coding for data analysis (already initiated during the previous stages of research). The process will be based upon creating pattern codes – explanatory and inferential meta-codes that help to identify emergent themes, configurations, explanations, and meanings. The aim is to group the first-level codes (created in the previous



research stages) into sets, themes, and constructs and create data displays (Miles; Huberman, 1994). At the next stage, the PI will use the method of clustering: “inductively forming categories, and the iterative sorting of things (...) into these categories” (Miles; Huberman, 1994, p. 249). This method allows the investigator to focus on explanations and understanding rather than theory-making. The intention is to focus on the depth of the data, rather than the breadth (Caswell; Cifor; Ramírez, p. 66).

However, exploring the issue of archives' impact on people and communities in Poland using these three community archives as examples may allow us to understand the nature of archives' impact in these specific cases in relation to local contexts. In the future, this can be used by researchers for example, to create quantitative studies based on the categories proposed in this study or to conduct comparative qualitative studies – also of the impact of community archives operating in different geographical locations and cultural settings (Gilliland, 2017; Ketelaar, 1997).

The results of the cross-case analysis will be contextualised and compared to the existing literature on the impact of archives, the impact of other institutions in the heritage sector, and the impact of community archives in particular.

4 RISKS AND CHALLENGES

The initial phase of the project, i.e., building a list of potential impacts of community archives, but also the final phase, i.e., contextualising the results, are based, among other things, on the most pluralised literature possible - and thus also one that goes beyond the languages familiar to the investigators. Moreover, the terms describing the local equivalents of community archives are not always literal translations of the term in English, such as the German *Freie Archive/Archive-von-unten* (free archives, archives from below) or the Polish *archiwa społeczne* (social archives) mentioned above. Also, the context of grassroots archives varies across the globe and within different archival/heritage traditions, so simply using translations without understanding the broader context can be misleading. In addition, while dealing with the phenomenon of community archives, much of the literature does not necessarily use the exact terminology (e.g., case studies



authored by practitioners). These issues complicate the study and make us consider the internationalization and pluralization of the scholarly discussion of community archives.

Understanding the impact of community archives is a difficult task in itself, since both the phenomenon of grassroots archives and their impact are highly context-dependent and rich in detail. To best accomplish this task, the project focuses specifically on social and affective impact (ignoring, for example, economic or educational impact) and leans on only three cases, going for depth rather than breadth of study. In addition, the project places community archivists, donors/contributors, and recipients of the archives' activities (users/audience) among the interviewees, to gain insight into the diverse relationships between archives and communities and individuals. Yet, access to user/the audience proves to be most difficult. Moreover, the analysis of archives' impact is conducted by as many as four researchers, with different educational and professional backgrounds and sensitivities, to capture, through discussion and negotiation, a variety of meanings and influences.

The project is grounded in collecting a large amount of qualitative data (dozens of hours of interviews, hundreds of documents and publications, hundreds of photographs). Their demanding and time-consuming analysis is supported by computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA), as well as the initial creation of a list of potential codes/impacts (applied to field data analysis), later supplemented by new codes during the analysis. Clustering codes in search of meaning and limiting the number of cases to three is also expected to help deal with this challenge.

The ethical challenges of the project are also interesting. The Faculty of History, where the project is placed and where the PI is employed, does not have its own ethics committee since almost no one employed at this faculty conducts research involving human participants. At the same time, there is no central committee at the university level, since they exist at other faculties (e.g. Faculty of Social Sciences) - but these (for official reasons) cannot process approvals for PIs employed outside them. There is also no disciplinary committee in Poland to deal with the ethics of archival research since it is traditionally a historical science, and these use a different methodology and traditionally do not deal with ethical issues of research (except for oral history, very sensitive to ethics in research) (Wiśniewska-Drewniak; Lowry; Kravchenko, 2023). To ensure that research is conducted by ethical standards, the investigators refer to the guidelines of the Polish Sociological



Association (Polskie Towarzystwo Socjologiczne, 2012) and good practices known from past research on archives (including community archives) (e.g. Gabiola; Caswell, 2017; Wakimoto; Bruce; Partridge, 2013).

This project gives research participants as much agency as possible. Interviewees can decide whether to be anonymized or not; the latter will enable recognition of their contribution to the study. They also have full decision-making authority to allow the interview transcript (or part of it) to be deposited in an open research data repository (as required by the funding agency). In addition, community archivists are asked to accept the report describing their archive - on the one hand, to ensure its quality and correct possible errors, omissions, or misunderstandings, and to supplement it with things they think were missing; on the other hand, to influence the information about the archive that is made public.

Qualitative empirical research based on fieldwork and lengthy interviews challenges the research process. According to Robert Yin (2015, p. 104), the case study is the most intellectually, mentally, and emotionally demanding method. Also emotionally challenging is the long and tiring organization of the data and its preparation for analysis, as well as the complicated analysis process itself. The research team, 3 out of 4 of whom have extensive experience with conducting and analysing qualitative interviews, was built with an awareness of these challenges. Specialized qualitative research software is also designed to assist in this process.

The researcher in the field is also highly dependent on the 'gatekeeper' - that is, the community archivist who introduces the researcher to the community and builds trust for them. This person is not only the primary source of information but is also responsible for reading the report describing the archive and putting the researcher in touch with further interviewees (donors/contributors, users, audience). Therefore, it is important to build a good relationship with this person and choose the case for the study carefully, ensuring the participants understand their involvement in the project (Wiśniewska-Drewniak; Kapała; Rosa; Siuda, 2026).

Like any field research, this project was also challenging to plan in some aspects. Both at the stage of writing the funding application and at later stages, it is impossible to predict the exact number of visits to the archives and the number of interviewees suggested by archivists, as well as whether these individuals will agree to participate in the study. As a result, it is impossible to predict



the number of interviews and their length, and as a result, the time required to transcribe and analyse them. This is where the 'strategic' writing of the grant proposal helps, as well as the relative flexibility provided by the terms of funding and the ability to make substantive and budgetary changes at the decision level of the PI or the university administration.

However, the funding agency's rules are much more demanding when it comes to publishing results - they are to be published in international scholarly circulation – primarily, in a language other than Polish (usually in English). This raises questions about the native (Polish) users of knowledge produced by tax-paid researchers. Are the native academic community and community archivists, people active in advocacy initiatives, heritage activists, heritage professionals (including state archivists), who do not always speak English, to be left out of the audience of this research that is focused, after all, on Poland? On the other hand, publishing the same results twice (in foreign journals in English and in local journals in Polish) does not seem an ethically appropriate practice. This challenge remains open to the Author.

5 OUTCOMES AND HOPES

In addition to the set of planned articles on community archives' impacts, an important element of the results is the research data produced and subsequently published in the open research data repository RepOD. This group includes a set of codes describing impacts of community archives; 3 case reports; transcripts of interviews with experts from Phase 1; and data from Phase 2, which includes interview transcripts and digital photographs collected during field studies at the archives.⁶ The goal of making this data available, as soon as the dynamics of the project allow, without imposing unnecessary embargoes, is to stimulate research on community archives and to include Polish archives in the ongoing discussion in the international academic community.

The Author trusts that the landscape of community archives in Poland will become more familiar to international researchers. The Author also hopes to expand the discussion of community archives and their impact beyond the currently dominant locations (mainly the UK and the US), also

⁶ At the moment of writing the article, the research data published online are expert interviews, two case reports, and interview transcripts and photographs from two cases. This is regularly updated on the project website: The Impact of Independent Community Archives: Results, available at <https://impact.umk.pl/pages/results/>, accessed 12 May 2026.



to non-English-speaking countries, and that this will serve to pluralize and diversify the scholarship on community archives and contemporary heritage institutions in general.

The Author also hopes that the IMPACT Project will aid the development of research on contemporary archives in Poland (and other countries where the archival discipline is still strictly connected to history) by promoting the use of empirical methods of qualitative research, and will stimulate studies that go beyond the historical research, as well as stimulate discussion of the inter- and transdisciplinary character of archival science (as opposed to its formal, legal assignment to history), and discussion of ethical issues of archival research in Poland.

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FUNDING

The research leading to these results received funding from the National Science Center in Poland under Grant Agreement No 2022/47/D/HS3/00914 (project title: The impact of independent community archives/Oddziaływanie niezależnych archiwów społecznych).

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