

Annotated Bibliography – Users with Visible and Invisible Disabilities

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Dreyer, R., & Nofziger, C. (2021). Reducing Barriers to Access in Archival and Special Collections Public Services. *Pennsylvania Libraries*, 9(1), 37-48. <https://doi.org/10.5195/palrap.2021.237>

In the transiting role of reference archivists from gatekeepers to facilitators, residual barriers continue to exist that impede the user experience for historically marginalized groups, and specifically for persons with disabilities. These barriers, both actual and perceived, are frequently unintentional or systemic in nature. This article provides scenarios that illustrate specific barriers to collections and research spaces, and how these have been addressed by the institutions at which they were encountered. Barriers discussed include physical, cultural, technical, policy oriented, and logistical.

The authors have a background in academic archives and special collections in a large, public university setting and their examples are drawn from academic institutions. The article's strength is that it draws upon real world narratives from the field. However, these come from a limited group of institutions with outcomes perhaps subject to variation if extended to a larger cohort that includes other types of archives. But the authors knowingly conclude that the work is ongoing, stressing that strategies like accessibility audits of public spaces, focus groups targeted at non-users or users for whom service is missing or alienating, surveys and instruction, along with honest assessments of existing spaces and services must be conducted across all archival institutions to identify and effectively reduce and eventually eliminate these barriers. Awareness is key and efforts are cumulative.

Information presented in this article complements recommendations from the SAA Guidelines for Accessible Archives for People with Disabilities and builds from materials presented by scholars exploring the impacts of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts including the need to expand collections to address information gaps as they pertain to users subject to these barriers. I am reminded of librarians conducting research to understand library users' information needs, while neglecting to research the needs of those persons *not* using the library. It is important to understand who is missing from archival space and why. Mind the gap!

Brilmyer, G. (2022). “They Weren’t Necessarily Designed with Lived Experiences of Disability in Mind”: The Affect of Archival In/Accessibility and “Emotionally Expensive” Spatial Un/Belonging. *Archivaria*, 94, 120-153. Retrieved from <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13869>

This article highlights the emotional impact of barriers to accessibility, noting how these “compound and accumulate” while also recognizing the positive ways in which access can forge meaningful connections and a sense of belonging. Findings are based on interviews conducted with a group of 10 self-described disabled archives users relating how they experience barriers to access, how they navigate archival spaces, and the emotional affect this creates. This includes barriers which are not only physical but extend to issues surrounding policy and the expectations of how archival work is meant to be conducted.

The author is disabled, and this informs her approach. Because the interviews were conducted by a disabled person giving voice to the perspectives of disabled persons, a layer of trust and openness is added that likely provides more depth and candor. But a shared outlook can also lay the trap of assumptions based on personal experience. However, the article is well supported with an extensive literature review informed by the field of critical access studies. The author builds on the work of Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez who investigate the affective impact of community-based archives on historically marginalized groups. It also draws on Annika M. Konrad’s concept of *access fatigue*, the exhaustion generated through repeat encounters with barriers that results in users abandoning their search.

The findings point to a lack of basic physical access, restrictive policies, and the perceived devaluation of both disability history and disabled users themselves. A poignant example is disabled entrances for academic archives located near loading docks and trash pick-up areas creating a symbolically dehumanizing user experience. The author argues for the need to go beyond legislation and accessibility standards like the ADA, which can be flawed and sporadic in its implementation and compliance, to embrace principals of Universal Design. The article does not offer solutions but provides a lens through which to view the authentic lived experiences of disabled people while encouraging change through *radical empathy*. I feel that if archives intends to truly embrace a service-oriented model, empathy must be the paramount component of that service.

Brilmyer, G. M. (2022). “I’m also prepared to not find me. It’s great when I do, but it doesn’t hurt if I don’t”: *crip time* and anticipatory erasure for disabled archival users. *Archival Science*, 22(2), 167-188. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-021-09372-1>

This article is a companion to the previous article. The author is the same, and the research method is conducted in the same way utilizing interviews with self-describing disabled persons. But where that article explored how disabled persons feel when occupying archival *space*, this article is focused on *time*, and how historic representations of disability in the archives, based on stereotypes or glaring omissions, create emotional affect in the present moment for disabled users. The author explores how experiences of archival erasure lead disabled users to expect similar outcomes with future encounters, creating a need for guarding and extra mental preparation to confront anticipated traumatic encounters within archival spaces.

The author notes that records pertaining to disability are scarce, but, where they do exist, they can be dehumanizing, having been used to demonstrate “otherness”. She argues that these representations, missing the perspective of the lived lives and cultures of disabled persons of the past, maintain and perpetuate narratives that continue to impact disabled people into the present day. Created by individuals or institutions in power, without input from those represented in the records, they often portray themes of institutionalization, incarceration and forced rehabilitation. This article adds to the ongoing work of drawing attention to silences in the archives and the myths of archival neutrality. A weakness to the research is its relatively small sample group of only ten persons. However, the research is very current, and is supported by a thorough literature review. Importantly, it applies to the reimagining of archival spaces and modification of policies and processes to create a more inclusive, relevant, and thus valued archives for the future.

Personally, I am most moved by the author’s attention to *crip time*, a concept relating to the way that people with disability, neurodivergence, or chronic illness experience time differently, and how extra time and energy as well as non-linear fluidity are required to differently accomplish the same tasks as able-bodied persons. She demonstrates how *crip time* is impacted or compounded by ableism and barriers to access in archives. This is part of my own lived experience with time revolving around my body’s needs and demands regardless of my own plans or intentions, or the rules and expectations imposed by other people.