

# Hidden Histories and The Question of Access – The Perspective of a Researcher

Tiffany Jenks

We live in an age where researchers are looking beyond the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ behind historical events to try and understand the ‘why’. This why is a far more personal question and often a lot harder to discover.<sup>1</sup> The history of emotions, though, is one way to explore these deeper reasons for why people act the way they do.<sup>2</sup> How does one explore the history of emotions? While I don’t believe it is possible to truly know the emotional motivations and experiences of individuals in the past, there are certain subjects in history through which we can begin to understand emotion more broadly; that allow us to unpack the societally-defined, often implicit rules surrounding emotions. Researching typically overlooked or potentially sensitive subjects like mental illness and shadow labour, for example, allow us to make these cultural regimes tractable and lets us explore the history of emotion. But these topics are often hidden and the voices of those affected can be hard to find.

Sources which contain information on more sensitive subjects in history are often protected, and for good reason: we must respect the people whose past we are delving into. But restrictions on sources have consequences for research. Why is it that the subject of mental illness surrounding the First World War is prolifically written about, yet the same subject during the Second World War is lacking?<sup>3</sup> Is it a lack of interest? Or is it a question of access? At present, it is difficult to gain access to archives protected under the 1993 Privacy Act. A simplified understanding of the Privacy Act sees it as guarding certain sensitive material such as medical and military records for 100 years.<sup>4</sup> In reality, the Act is more nuanced than this and can be difficult for both researchers and the institutions regulating access to material to fully comprehend. Factors like what the material is, why the researcher wants access, and what the researcher intends to do with the information all play a part in the accessibility of archives protected by the Act. At its essence, the Act seeks to protect the privacy of the people whom the documentation includes, but in my experience, a lack of understanding of how the Act impacts archives and an unwillingness to share understanding on access

to archives is also leading to a barrier for researchers.

During my honours year studying history at the University of Otago, I wanted to research how war-related mental illness impacted women and children after World War Two. The most difficult question of this subject was how to find primary sources which could help me understand the effect mental illness had on families. It is already difficult to find the voice of women and children in archives but add the subject of mental illness and sources become even more disparate. Being in Dunedin, my first port of call was the Hocken Library and I discovered that the Hocken holds the Dunedin RSA Collection. This collection contains the Dunedin RSA Welfare Claims Files.<sup>5</sup> At the request of the RSA, these files are restricted and the Hocken staff explained the process of applying for access. After writing to the RSA and explaining why I wanted access, they were happy to grant permission under the condition that I did not identify people. As it is when researching, I was unsure if these files would be useful in my search into a hidden history. Fortunately, this unique source proved to be a window into the difficulties men and women experienced because they felt comfortable being open with the RSA. Additionally, they reflected how the RSA tried to support men, women and children in families where a returned service personnel was suffering from war neurosis.

The files posed a methodological challenge: how to systematically search through them. The series, ranging from 1940-1989, contains welfare applications from veterans of the Boer War, World War One, World War Two, Korea, Borneo and Malaya, and Vietnam. The files are only ordered roughly chronologically by when the application was made, meaning that I could not be sure how many files in an individual box related to World War Two veterans. The chronological organisation meant that I settled on searching through the first ten boxes to see what I could find, and from there made a decision regarding the need for further research. Eventually I searched through all thirty-eight boxes of claims files, wanting to maximise the number of cases so I could broadly discuss non-governmental support provided in Dunedin, and the wider Otago region, by the NZRSA. The nature and range of support offered by the Dunedin RSA meant that only sixty of the 2,573 claims files mentioned war neurosis. After this survey, it became clear the topic needed to shift from solely focusing on the effect on women and children, to speak more on the support available for the men suffering from war neurosis and their families. In the end, the Dunedin RSA Claims Files, in conjunction with Seacliff Soldier Patients Files, yielded a dissertation which focuses

on both governmental and non-governmental support for World War Two returned servicemen suffering from war neurosis, and how these two forms of support services co-operated to best provide assistance.<sup>6</sup>

I took a risk with this topic; a risk that resulted in uncertainty about whether I could complete my dissertation because gaining access to the Seacliff Soldier Patient Files was such a long and complicated task. The dissertation was due in October and by July I only had two chapters written. I was also reliant on being granted access to the Seacliff files to provide content for the final chapter and increasingly it appeared that this was not going to happen. The time restraint placed on the dissertation meant that if access was not granted, I would either have to search for another source or to begin again on a subject with fewer restrictions. Luckily by mid-July I was able to begin researching through the Soldier Patient Files. At first, I was disheartened by their contents because I could not see how the information from these files would fit with the existing bulk of the dissertation. However, my supervisor Russell Johnson gave me sound advice: do not focus on what is not within the archives but focus on what the archives are telling you. For researchers studying hidden histories, information in the archives can be slim but they still tell a story, you just have to work out what that story is. This advice made a poor second chapter into something far more interesting.

Hidden histories are a tricky subject for many reasons. When researching a subject that people did not openly speak about it can be difficult to find the voices of those affected by such subjects as emotional regimes, shadow labour and mental illness. If people did not want to discuss a subject in the past, then often the need to protect their privacy continues in the future. But alongside this, there *are* ways research on topics of a hidden nature can be improved. Access is an increasingly crucial priority in the GLAM sector and large-scale digitisation is one way that open access is being implemented in New Zealand archives. The ability to research newspapers, WWI military files, shipping and probate records online has eased the ability to research, particularly in the realm of public history.<sup>7</sup> The point of an archive is to preserve history for the benefit of the future and the more the topic of access is considered, the greater benefits we will see. I do not see the 1993 Privacy Act changing any time soon, but I would like to think that the subject of access concerning the act is being discussed. The more the entities governing access are aware of how the act impacts them and how it relates to different researching situations, the less uncertainty around the ability to research hidden histories will be. At present, there seems

to be lack of communication between the archive, external stakeholders (e.g. those who give permission for access to sensitive material), and the researcher. Additionally, there seems to be a lack of cohesion across archival institutions in New Zealand regarding their understanding of and stance on the Act. These two factors contribute significantly to confusion surrounding access to sensitive materials and in turn create a culture of reluctance to approach subjects which may involve the Privacy Act. Communication and education surrounding how the Privacy Act impacts on archives, external stakeholders, and on researchers should be incorporated into conversations about access. Beyond this, communication and education should be implemented at the ground level so that archives can better support turning knowledge into value.

At the end of my dissertation, my supervisor Angela Wanhalla said to me that she was surprised I had not chosen to change my topic. The beauty of history is it can be rewritten through different perspectives to create something previously unthought of. But the uncertainty of finding answers or pushing the boundaries of archival research is preventing us from going beyond the perimeters of our knowledge. Historians are ready to breach the current innate conservatism of research and a leading step towards this will be to consider the ways we can change thinking about archival access. It is the difficulties surrounding sources which deter one from delving into sensitive, restricted subjects but in my opinion very much worth the uncertainty of the outcome. My dissertation is only a small insight into the impact that war neurosis had on returned service personnel and their families, but I hope that it opens a door for others to research into the subject.<sup>8</sup> Beyond this, I hope the current discussions surrounding access result in the culture of conservatism on both the part of archives and researchers is changing.

---

**Endnotes**

1. "Introduction," in *Culture/ Power/ History: A Reader in Social Theory*, ed. Nicholas B Dirks, Geoff Eley, Sherry B Ortner (Princeton University Press, 1994), PP.3-45, The New Cultural History, ed. Aletta Biersack, Lynn Hunt (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989).
2. Thomas Dixon, 'History in British Tears: Some reflections on the anatomy of modern emotions,' unpublished keynote lecture, Netherlands Historical Association, Den Haag, 4 November 2011, Thomas Dixon, "From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category," (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003).
3. Elizabeth Walker, "The living death": the repatriation experience of New Zealand's disabled Great War Servicemen" (M.A. Thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2013);Gwen Parsons, "The construction of Shell Shock in New Zealand, 1919-1939: A reassessment," *Social History of Medicine* 26, no.1 (2013): 56-73; Weaver and Wright; Marie Ann Robertson, "They were never the same after the war': the mental health of returned World War One soldiers and the effect on family and community" (BA Hons. Thesis, University of Otago, 2003); Peter Boston, "The bacillus of work: masculinity and the rehabilitation of disabled soldiers in Dunedin 1919 to 1939" (BA Hons. Thesis, University of Otago, 1993); Russell Clarke, "Not mad, but very ill: the treatment of New Zealand's shell shocked soldiers 1914 to 1939" (M.A. Thesis, University of Auckland, 1991); Stephen Clarke, "Return, repatriation, remembrance, and the Returned Soldiers Association 1916-1922," in *New Zealand, the Allies and the First World War*, ed. John Crawford and Ian McGibbon (Auckland, NZ.: Auckland Existe Publishing, 2007), 157-181.
4. New Zealand Legislation, "1993 Privacy Act." <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1993/0028/latest/DLM296639.html> Accessed 24/02/18.
5. Dunedin Returned Servicemen's Association, Welfare Claims Files 1940-1989, SER-09548, Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin.
6. Seacliff Mental Hospital Soldier Patients Files, 1950-1972, DAHI/D266/19849/Box 433 &434, Archives New Zealand, Dunedin.
7. <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers>, <http://archives.govt.nz/world-war-one>, <http://archives.govt.nz/resources/research-resources/searching-digitised-probates>, <http://archives.govt.nz/resources/research-resources/searching-passenger-lists>.
8. Tiffany Jenks "They hold us responsible for their welfare:" war neurosis, World War Two veterans, families, and the New Zealand Returned Servicemen's Association" (BA Hons. Dissertation, University of Otago, 2016).