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## OPEN QUESTIONS OF RESEARCH ON APPRAISAL

### Abstract

**Purpose:** *A recent study (Henttonen & Packalén, 2023)2023 shows what kind of records have been selected for permanent preservation in a Finnish city. This paper discusses questions that are raised by the study.*

**Method/Approach:** *Analysis of timeline of the documents that guide appraisal at national and municipal level suggests that appraisal is in its entirety a complex and lengthy process that spans over decades and involves several actors.*

**Results:** *This makes it challenging to find connections between abstract level of archival theory and national appraisal policy and strategy, on one hand, and low-level decisions about the fate of records.*

**Conclusions/findings:** *There is room for research that examines how decisions about appraisal are reached and what is the social process behind decisions about appraisal.*

**Keywords:** *appraisal, research, Finland*

## QUESTIONI DI RICERCA APERTE IN MATERIA DI SELEZIONE

### Astratto

**Finalità:** *In un recente studio (Henttonen & Packalén, 2023)2023 si offre una panoramica del tipo di documenti che in una città finlandese sono stati selezionati a scopo di conservazione permanente. Il presente contributo sviluppa ulteriormente il tema affrontando le criticità evidenziate dallo studio precedente.*

**Metodo:** *Analizzando la cronologia dei documenti che sono alla base delle decisioni di selezione a livello urbano e nazionale verrebbe da pensare che si tratta di un processo complessivamente articolato e tutt'altro che immediato, che interessa un orizzonte temporale di decenni e coinvolge molteplici soggetti.*

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**Risultati:** *Ne deriva che sia difficile trovare dei punti di contatto tra la dimensione astratta della teoria archivistica e delle politiche e strategie nazionali in tema di selezione, da un lato, e la dimensione concreta delle decisioni operative riguardanti il destino dei documenti, dall'altro.*

**Conclusioni:** *Si individuano margini di ricerca sulle modalità di assunzione delle decisioni in tema di selezione e sulle dinamiche sociali in atto dietro alle stesse.*

**Parole chiave:** *Selezione, ricerca, Finlandia.*

## ODPRTA VPRAŠANJA RAZISKAV NA TEMO VREDNOTENJA

### Izvleček

**Namen:** *nedavna študija (Henttonen & Packalén, 2023) kaže, kakšne vrste zapisov so bile izbrane za trajno hrambo v določenem finskem mestu. Ta prispevek obravnava vprašanja, ki jih odpira študija.*

**Metoda/pristop:** *Analiza časovnice dokumentov, ki usmerjajo vrednotenje na državni in občinski ravni, kaže, da je vrednotenje v celoti kompleksen in dolgotrajen proces, ki traja več desetletij in vključuje več akterjev.*

**Rezultati:** *zaradi tega je težko najti povezave med abstraktno ravno arhivske teorije ter nacionalno politiko in strategijo vrednotenja na eni strani ter odločitvami na nižji ravni o usodi teh dokumentov.*

**Sklepi/ugotovitve:** *Obstaja prostor za raziskave, ki preučujejo, kako se sprejemajo odločitve o vrednotenju in kakšen je družbeni proces, ki stoji za odločitvami o vrednotenju.*

**Ključne besede:** *ocenjevanje, raziskovanje, Finska*

*Henttonen ja Packalén (2023) as well as those with long-lasting consequences (such as high-level decision-making, environmental factors, constructions, land use, and people tarkastelevat tutkimuksessaan erään suomalaisen kaupungin tiedonohjaussuunnitelman säilytysaikoja ja sitä, millaisia asiakirjatyyppejä on siinä määriteltä arkistoitavaksi. Artikkelissa käsitellään tutkimuksen herättämiä kysymyksiä. Arvonmäärittystä kansallisella ja kuntatasolla ohjaavien dokumenttien tarkastelu osoittaa, että arvonmäärittys on kokonaisuutena pitkään kestävä prosessi, johon*

*osallistuu lukuisia toimijoita. Tämä tekee vaikeaksi tunnistaa yhteyksiä ylätason teoreettisten, abstraktien strategialinjausten sekä alatason konkreettisten säilytys-aikapäätösten välillä. Tarvitaan tutkimusta siitä, miten seulontapäätökset muotoutuvat ja mikä on niiden taustalla oleva sosiaalinen prosessi.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A recent study (Henttonen & Packalén, 2023)<sup>2023</sup> examined what records are selected for permanent preservation in a Finnish city. It also analyzed assigned retention periods in general. The study is open access. Therefore, in this paper I do not go through all the details of the study here. Instead, I problematize our knowledge of archival appraisal and suggest research topics.

## 2. RESEARCH SETTING

Research setting is integrated in international comparison. Finnish records managers are not a separate group from archivists, and both record professionals in the city and specialists in the National Archives contribute to what is identified as permanently valuable and worthy of archiving.

Research data consists primarily of the records management plan of the city. Finnish practice is to assign a retention period individually to every record type in a functional class. This is documented in the records management plan.

## 3. FINDINGS

The findings of the study (Henttonen & Packalén, 2023)<sup>2023</sup> show that in general 20–50 % of record types have been selected for permanent preservation across the function. Excluding one anomaly (a small and new function in which the appraisal process may not be final) the percentage of permanently valuable record types is highest in the function 00 Administrative affairs which generates records documenting the highest-level decision-making. Intuitively, this seems natural and is hardly surprising.

Next come functions of 10 Land use, construction, and housing and 11 Environmental affairs. Although the difference to other functions is not huge, it suggests that permanence of phenomena documented in the records is an issue that is consciously or subconsciously noted when appraisal decisions are made.

Another interesting finding was that typically the assigned retention period to a record type was either permanent retention (39 %) or ten years retention (35 %). This suggests that although it is possible to make refined appraisal decisions, in most cases the retention period is assigned almost mechanically: if the record type does not have permanent value, it is retained for ten years. There is probably assumption that this will probably be enough to satisfy needs of the organization.

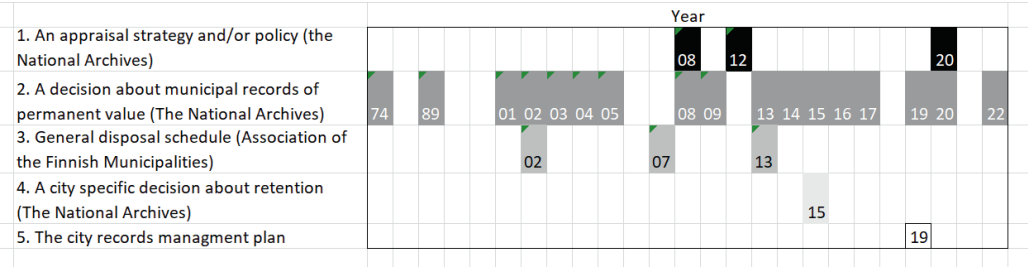
4. DISCUSSION

Thus, the findings of the study by Henttonen and Packalén (2023) show what is the result of the appraisal process. The study does not tell how this result has been reached. This opens interesting questions that have no answer.

In archival literature appraisal has been eagerly discussed. Classics of archival theory have discussed, for instance, whether archivists should take part in appraisal decisions and what are criteria for information that should be preserved permanently (Stapleton, 1983), values behind the decisions (Booms, 1987), and best appraisal strategies (Cook, 2004; Samuels, 1992). These discussions suggest that appraisal is complex, theory laden, and value laden process.

From this perspective it makes sense to ask, what are the values and the theories behind the appraisal decisions here. The question is important and simple, but the answer is probably not. There might be a relatively simple answer if appraisal was a distinct, clear-cut process, in which decisions are made by one stroke by an identifiable person or group of persons. Although the study (Henttonen & Packalén, 2023)2023 did not examine this, it the opposite seems to be true; appraisal is a process spanning long periods of time and involving numerous persons. This becomes obvious when we look at the context of the records management plan.

Table 1: Time frame of the documents guiding appraisal.



The table 1 shows roughly the time frame of documents guiding appraisal. Although it may not be complete, it is illustrative and gives an overview.

Firstly, the current records management plan was accepted for use in the year 2019 (bottom row in the table), but it would be erroneous to assume that the content of the city records management plan originates from that time. Records management plans were introduced in the Finnish public sector records management already in the beginning of the 1980s (Henttonen, 2019). Simply maintaining a plan is a huge task for records management. Therefore, the plans evolve gradually and there are always parts that have been carried over from previous versions unchanged. The current plan is “continuously updated.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is a combination of older and more current appraisal decisions.

In Finnish “semi-jenkinsonian” appraisal practice also records creators participate in appraisal (Henttonen, 2019), but ideas of archival theory are visible only in the policy and strategy documents of the National Archives (first row in the table). Its appraisal strategy and policy guide appraisal at national level. Unfortunately, seeing relationships between national policy and strategy documents on one hand, and implementation of appraisal on local level on the other hand, is far from easy. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, national level strategy and policy documents are ambiguous. They do not define one approach or criteria for appraisal but rather offer a list of ideas that can be applied. Both changes in national level appraisal, and ideas that one should find behind a particular decision about appraisal are hard to identify.

Secondly, the first policy and strategy documents were published in the year 2008, but many appraisal decisions precede that, and, thus, have no explicit theoretical background. The second row in the table shows this. The National Archives has published almost every year a document outlining appraisal in the municipalities. Unlike the national level appraisal policy and strategy documents, these documents are quite concrete: they list documents that generally have permanent value and are to be archived. Because Finnish municipalities have had broad responsibilities, this process has taken place piece by piece: for example, in one year one the National Archives has outlined what are permanently valuable records in health care, and on another year, what should be preserved from

2 See <https://tiedonohjaus.hel.fi/>.

records in housing. As far as I know, older decisions have not been revised when a new strategy and policy document has been issued. Therefore, these decisions originate from different time periods and, thus, may not represent an internally coherent set of ideas in appraisal theory.

A third level in appraisal documents comes from the Association of Finnish Municipalities which has published general disposal schedules for municipalities (the third row). These documents incorporate decisions of the National Archives and suggest retention times for ephemeral records.

Fourthly, the National Archives has made city specific decisions about appraisal (the fourth row).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, in its entirety documents guiding disposition in a municipality form a complex whole that spans over decades. Specialists from the National Archives, the Association of Municipalities and the city recordkeeping professionals have participated in identifying what records have permanent value. The distance between the most abstract and the most concrete representation of the value of records – that is, between policy and strategy documents of the National Archives and the city records management plan – is huge. In between there are levels of interpretation and discussion.

Currently appraisal is a “black box” from research point of view; one can see the result, but not how it has been reached. There is room for research that studies appraisal, not only as a playfield of archival theorists, but as a social process, for instance.

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***Typology: 1.01 Original scientific research***