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Achieving success in historic research: The importance of research methods and theory

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Achieving success in historic research: The importance of research methods and theory

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Historical research provides an important contribution to the field of fashion and textiles. Furthermore, it is an important subset of research presented at the annual ITAA conference as well as published in the *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*. One of the challenges of having one's research accepted for both publication and presentation is communicating strong research methods and theory in the research process. When the methods and/or theory behind the research are not clearly stated, the credibility of the research can come into question. In order to establish quality of inquiry and improve publication rates, it is important to have a strong methodology in the research.

There are many established research methods used in historical research that provide guidelines on how to conduct quality research. In addition, many argue that theory can and should be applied to historical research. This panel discussed ways of communicating research methods to improve presentations and publications. Panelists discussed selected research methods currently being used in historical research and addressed the definition of theory as well as theory development. Historical research is intended to provide a valuable and valid contribution to dress scholarship. By better implementing and communicating research methods and theory, scholars can better justify and validate the relevancy of their research. In turn, scholars are likely to experience higher acceptance rates for both presentation and publication.

Research Using Theory (Elaine L. Pedersen)

Most historical research contains, uses, and/or develops theory. Theory plays an important role because it helps to guide one's research. Theory can be defined as "a set of statements that advances knowledge by describing, explaining, or predicting the relationship between two or more concepts" (Pedersen, 2007, p. 123). Sometimes, historical research utilizes established named theories which are clearly defined in the research process and guide the development of research questions, assist in developing a framework for the study to answer the questions, and can help explain research findings. Other research incorporates unnamed mini theories which consist of a hypothesis that links two or more concepts in a relational statement in the analysis stage. In some cases, researchers can use a combination of named theories to assist with developing his or her own mini theoretical ideas.

Historical Method (Michael Mamp)

To better answer history-based questions, it is important to study examples of appropriate primary and secondary source materials in order to make plausible assumptions about the past. In historical method, it is helpful to triangulate information by examining a variety of sources that

support and provide evidence for the research findings. By analyzing different types of media, such as visual evidence and textual information, that represent the research question, the researcher is better able to justify conclusions and hypothesis statements.

Content Analysis (Arlesa Shephard)

Content analysis is a method used for analyzing forms of communication (verbal or nonverbal). The source materials for this research often involve the use of serial units, such as a magazine publication, or similar thematic units, such as photographs representing a specific style or era. Throughout the research process, themes or categories are identified to help organize the information identified during the research process. The research process involves a systematic analysis that often includes quantitative elements. Additional information is consulted to help justify claims made within the findings.

Object Based Research (Arlesa Shephard)

Sometimes referred to as material culture, object based research places emphasis on the study of artifacts to better understand the relationship between an artifact and the culture in which it was used. There are several established methodologies that researchers use to develop the research framework (Fleming, 1974; Prown, 1982; Smith, 1985). Many of these methodologies involve examining the artifact closely and collecting descriptive information. Object based research also includes analysis of the object to better understand its design and function. Supplementary documentation and other resources should be consulted to help support the interpretation and findings of the study.

Ethnography and Oral History (Denise Nicole Green)

Ethnography and oral history involve tracing, discovering, and following stories across time and space. Researchers are often involved in the creation of archival material by documenting observations and/or conversations with people who represent a specified culture, an event, or a period in history. The arguments developed through the processes of ethnography and oral history documenting are often triangulated with the examination of artifacts and archival materials to better support research findings. Ethnography is an iterative process that involves moving back and forth between archive and community, participation and observation, past and present (Green, 2016).

Planning and Publication (Sara Marcketti)

One of the most challenging aspects of conducting historical research is identifying a significant research topic. The best way to begin is to examine primary and secondary sources to see what has been previously researched and whether there are more questions yet to be answered. When planning a research project, it is important to identify a time frame, source material, and a research question(s). Prior to beginning the research, it is important to identify theory and methodology that will be used to help investigate the research questions. Furthermore, plan ahead to identify potential presentation and publication outlets. When working with an advisor

and/or co-authors, it is important to establish authorship for presentations and publications up front.

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