



## The History of Knowledge is Sociomaterial

Third, the history of knowledge is a “sociomaterial” one, entangled in the order and disorder of daily life. By focusing on the material, the essays shine light on the women and men, the families and communities who used and manipulated paper. By making paper visible, the volume denaturalizes the social in practices of knowledge production. They analyze the complex worlds in which paper circulates as sets of relationships structured by power and difference. And, they observe how paper moves through the hands of historical actors, producing knowledge as they relate to one another in ways deemed feminine or masculine.



<sup>05</sup> “Casket of Knowledge.” Mrs. L. Miles, *Phrenology and the Moral Influence of Phrenology: Arranged on 40 Cards* (London: Ackermann and Co., 1835), UCLA Library Special Collections, BF870.P577.

Gabriella Szalay makes these negotiations evident through the paper trials of the protestant pastor Jacob Christian Schäffer and his failed attempts to mass produce paper with home-grown substances such as pine cones, poplar wool, or wasps’ nests.<sup>05</sup> In her narrative, eighteenth-century governance, natural history, experimentation and artisanal expertise coalesced in a potent mix, in which multiple notions of masculinity were equally at stake. In Carla Bittel’s piece, practitioners and consumers of phrenology in Antebellum America used paper charts

and cards to assess but also negotiate their own degrees of femininity and masculinity as a way of knowing themselves.<sup>05</sup> Altogether, the articles in *Working with Paper* invite readers to enter a universe beyond the page, where paper and gender co-constitute the ways we know. The objects of study (papers and paper stuff) and the methodology (gender analysis) form the grid through which we see knowledge practices unfold in multiple and continual negotiations of power. Such a new perspective emphasizes how knowledge production is inextricable from the order and disorder of the quotidian in which epistemic work is carried out.

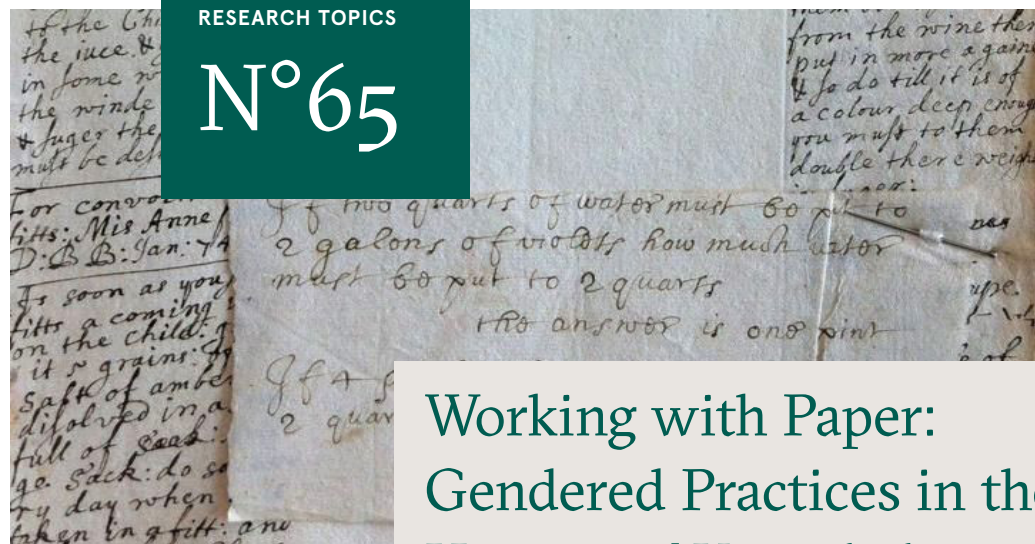
### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Front page: Detail of page taken from the recipe book of Margaret Boscawen (d. 1688) and Bridget Fortescue (1666–1708). Devon Heritage Centre, 1262M/0/FC6.

RESEARCH TOPICS

N°65



## Working with Paper: Gendered Practices in the History of Knowledge

by Carla Bittel, Elaine Leong, and Christine von Oertzen  
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It all began with lunch and three colleagues talking about notebooks. As paper technologies, they noted, notebooks had certainly been recognized by historians as vital instruments for knowledge making. But what about gender and paper practices, and the gendering of “paper work?” From the household to the laboratory, whose hands inscribed, carried, folded, twisted, pinned, and shuffled these materials? And how did the materiality of paper intersect with gender identities and gendered bodies? The trio concluded that much more could be said and understood about knowledge, paper, and the gendered worlds that made them. The result was the formation of the Working Group, “Working with Paper: Gendered Practices in the History of Knowledge,” and now a book of the same name, published in June 2019 by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

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As part of the Gender Studies of Science Project within Department II, the group developed a new perspective on how working with paper constitutes what we know. The groups members came from universities across Europe and the US, and spent four months in residence at the institute from September to December 2016. They participated in a conference and two authors' workshops, which led to the final product, a volume that breaks new ground in the history of knowledge. The book demonstrates that paper, so ubiquitous that it was often taken for granted, was enmeshed with social conceptions of femininity and masculinity, similarly so pervasive as to be sometimes imperceptible. In doing so, it makes three claims about paper, knowledge, and gender:

First, the universe of paper and knowledge goes much beyond reading and writing, and the learned practices of a few. In myriad ways, paper matters beyond the page: as a material, a writing substrate, and an object. The book's chapters consider a wide range of paper materials and objects. Heather Wolfe illustrates how careful folding and sealing of letters mattered as much as what was inscribed on the page. Elaine Leong considers early modern recipes and reveals how householders, men and women,<sup>20</sup>

codified medical knowledge through inscribing, sorting, and pinning together. Simon Werrett uncovers the multiple uses of paper in the eighteenth-century household where French brown paper was used to curl hair.<sup>22</sup> Christine von Oertzen shows the true weight of sturdy census cards as they circulated throughout Berlin, and were sorted by housewives in their parlors. Anna Maerker demonstrates how paper made anatomical models served to educate not just medical students, but also edify and reform the workers who assembled the models. As the volume reveals, "paper work" involved multiple practices beyond the page, from mixing paper paste to molding shapes to making labels to reading and learning from printed books. In his afterword, Jacob Elyertz expands this Western spectrum of paper materials and practices by reflecting on the production and uses of bamboo paper in late Imperial China.



21 Above: Pleated letter secured with light blue embroidery floss.

22 Above: Pleated letter secured with pink silk embroidery floss; autograph letter signed from Lady Jane Ashley to Walter Bagot, circa 1609. Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC, MS L.a.852/L.a.19.

Paper Objects Transcend Boundaries



22 (left) Burning curts with French brown paper. Matthew Darity (printer), "Ridiculous Taste or the Ladies Absurdity" (London, 1771). Trustees of the British Museum.  
23 (above) Paperboard spinning wheels modeling the US population (1930). The top wheel represents data on mortality among white women. Photo: D. Bouk.



Second, the book demonstrates that paper objects transcend boundaries and shape epistemic communities, the work, and the people engaging with them. Each contribution takes a particular paper object as a three-dimensional tool and technology. Beth Linker examines how translucent tracing paper, intended for map-making and mechanical engineering, became a medium for "physiological feminism" in the early days of American posture science.<sup>24</sup> Dan Bouk shows how questionnaires used to gather data and the tools to model postwar population research enabled researchers to bridge the spaces between the homes visited during their fieldwork and the "laboratory" space at the research institute.<sup>25</sup> Elena Serrano situates eighteenth-century parchment slips inscribed with names and other crucial information attached to the waists of babies as part of a panoptical paper system set up to fight the horrific death rates of Madrid's foundling house. By following paper—and the tools made from it—into quotidian practices and workflows of knowledge production, the case studies uncover the multilayered conjunctions of paper, good and bad posture, Department of Orthopedics, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, 1926. From Massachusetts General Hospital Archives and Special Collections (subject file Orthopedic Department), Boston, MA.



24 Photograph of a posture clinic with silhouettes of