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Working with archived classic family and community studies: illuminating past and present conventions around acceptable research practice

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This article addresses the ways that working with archived classic family and communities studies from the 1960s can throw a different light on past and present research conventions around acceptable research practice. We consider the constitution of ‘good’ methodological conduct through looking at the nature of data and acknowledgement of who generates it, culminating in a focus on the implications of acceptable and unacceptable researcher accounts. Past conventions raise questions about the merging of primary data and context alongside which is active in the research field, while present understandings of ‘good’ ethical practice become a suspect narrative.

Keywords: archived community studies; Dennis Marsden; historical comparative analysis; parenting; Peter Townsend; research conventions; research ethics; secondary qualitative data analysis

Introduction

In this article, we consider the ways that working with archived classic sociological studies can throw light on past and current research conventions around acceptable research practices. The challenges to taken for granted assumptions that we discuss were raised by a research project we undertook which assessed the feasibility of conducting qualitative secondary analysis to explore change and continuity in experiences of family and parenting practice over four decades. The ‘Historical comparative analysis of family and parenting: a feasibility study across sources and timeframes’¹ used thematic analytic questions to examine the possibilities for working across different sorts of qualitative material, in particular across in-depth community and family studies conducted in the 1960s, held by the UK Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) Qualidata archive.

We briefly explain the context for this study before exploring the insights around what constitutes ‘good’ research practice that are the focus of this piece.

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The historical comparative analysis of family and parenting study

Much academic, political and popular attention is focused on the nature of transformations in family relationships and parental support systems since the mid-twentieth century, often arguing that parenting practices recently have deteriorated especially in poor, working-class communities (e.g. Field, 2010). In the main, theorists derive evidence of social change in the UK from large-scale quantitative social surveys such as the General Household Survey or the Census (Edwards & Gillies, 2005; Savage, 2007). This emphasis on macro, demographic change is rarely accompanied by a detailed exploration of lives as they were lived in the past. Without such detail it is difficult to assess the real nature and extent of social change in family life and parenting. While family forms may change, content may endure, or vice versa (Charles, Aull Davies, & Harris, 2008a, 2008b), and equally for communities (Crow, 2008). In relation to attitudes to aspects of intimate relationships, what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable may shift but the distribution of liberal and conservative views may remain much the same (Duncan, 2011; see also this issue). Further, cyclical patterns may be mistaken for linear change (Stanley, 1992), with a fixed 'othered' past differentiated from an ephemeral present (Adam, 1996). Enduring concerns may be reframed in new language and understood as different and previous traditions of theory and inquiry may have limited understanding of classic data from contemporary perspectives and concerns (Bornat & Wilson, 2008; Goulbourne, 2006).

We thus embarked upon working with archived classic data from the 1960s, attempting to provide insights into the nature of social change and continuity in parenting practices. Interestingly, in the light of contemporary assertions about social change, social research carried out in the 1960s was also often pre-occupied with what were regarded as major shifts occurring in the social and material fabric. Indeed, the ability to investigate and understand social change was the marker around which sociology justified its research expertise in the early 1960s (Savage, 2010). The sense of seismic social and material transformations in family life and parenting that provided the context for our work, then, is a continuous political and disciplinary theme.

The more recent material that we used as an early 2000s benchmark against which to gauge the nature of social change in parenting practices consisted of normative data about supportive resources from a representative national sample of parents and in-depth accounts of everyday practices from mothers and fathers. (Those interested in details of the research process and findings from our early 2000s study can consult Edwards & Gillies, 2004, 2005, 2011; Gillies, 2005, 2009; Gillies & Edwards, 2006a, 2006b.)

In the case of the classic data, although research on families was conducted in the 1960s, relevant themes to our study (resources in parenting and family life) often are embedded in a range of sources concerned with broader topics like class or community. After assessing various data sources held at ESDS Qualidata and the Alfred Sloman Library at the University of Essex, we identified studies from two main collections as offering a valuable insight into a range of experiences of family life and parenting at the time – see Table 1.

Efforts to explore social change and understand its meaning encounter numerous complexities. The context and focus of studies shift over time, generating numerous epistemological and methodological issues for working with historically and culturally specific data-sets. We have discussed a range of these issues in relation to our study elsewhere (Gillies & Edwards, 2011). Here, we concern ourselves specifically

Table 1. Classic sociological collections and studies used in the historical comparative analysis of family and parenting.^a

Collection	Study	Key topics and location
Dennis Marsden	ACE ^b Parents and education 1960–1961 Salford Slum and Re-housing 1962–1963 Mothers alone 1965–1966	Parental decisions about education, resources and philosophies, the UK Rehousing of slum population on central redevelopment estate and over-spill area, employment, working-class family life, working class- community life, Salford Divorced, separated, widowed and unmarried mothers and their children, national assistance, living standards, poverty, support networks: fathers, wider family and friends, Colchester, Huddersfield
Peter Townsend	Katharine Buildings 1957–1962 Poverty in the UK 1967–1968	Social change, housing, urban communities, urban renewal, working-class life, family life, community life, rented accommodation, tenants, tenancy, East London Poverty, deprivation, employment, unemployment, disability, family, one parent families, children, old age, housing, household budgets, living standards, nutrition, health, UK

^aMarsden, D., ACE Parents and Education Survey, 1960/1961 [unprocessed study]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], SN: 6224; Marsden, D. Salford Slum and Rehousing Study, 1962/1963 [unprocessed study]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], SN: 6225; Marsden, D., *Mothers Alone: Poverty and the Fatherless Family*, 1965–1960 [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], February 2005, SN: 5072; Townsend, P., Katharine Buildings, 1885–1962 [unprocessed study]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive – National Social Policy and Social Change Archive. Albert Sloman Library Special Collections, University of Essex [distributor], January 2005. SN: 4756; Townsend, P. and Abel-Smith, B., *Poverty in the United Kingdom: a Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living*, 1967–1969 [computer files]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], 1982, SN: 1671.

^bThe advisory centre for education (ACE) was founded in 1960 by Michael Young, the sociologist and social innovator, when he was founder and director of the institute of community studies, where Marsden was based when he carried out this research (as was Townsend at the time of his Katharine Buildings study). ACE still exists as a national charity that provides information to parents and promotes fairness in education provision.

with how working with archived classic family and community studies brings into sharp relief many of the taken for granted expectations governing today's social science research. In particular, we consider what convention deems to be 'good' practice though looking at the nature of data and acknowledgement of who generates it, culminating in a focus on the constitution of acceptable conduct in terms of what can/is, and cannot be/is not, remarked upon, where methodology and substance overlap.

The nature of data and acknowledgement of who generates them

At a fundamental level we had to reconsider what should qualify as a qualitative data-set for us to investigate. In drawing up our research proposal for the study, we specified that up to five 'accounts' would be taken from each classic study we selected as feasible sub-samples. This sort of definition of process provided us with a reassuringly clear research plan, but it relied on a greater match between historical studies and today's understandings of the constitution of research data than was

actually the case. For example, like many other recent qualitative studies, our 2000s *Resources in Parenting* research consisted of detailed semi-structured interviews, tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The accounts that we took from the classic studies we were working with were of a very different order. On the one hand, interviews conducted by Dennis Marsden were typewritten recollections of conversations recorded after the event. These individual documents contained a distinctive mix of remembered quotes alongside descriptions, reflections and conjecture. Figure 1 provides an example extract from Marsden's fieldnotes on 'The family upstairs' from the *Salford Slum and Rehousing Study*.

On the other hand, interviews from Peter Townsend's *Katherine Buildings* study conformed to a more structured survey style. But while designed for quantitative analysis the survey documents contain numerous open questions and additional annotations generating useful qualitative data, highlighting how the distinction between quantitative and qualitative data is not always clear cut. Further, we found that the 1967/1968 survey booklets containing the questionnaires for Townsend's large scale quantitative study *Poverty in the UK* contained handwritten annotations. An undigitised survey booklet for a husband and wife and their three sons, interviewed by Ian J. McCannah in March 1968, contains marginal notes that they 'had help when these things [emergencies] have occurred and husband ill – from neighbour in flats'; that the husband said 'we keep ourselves to ourselves'; that the wife took the children to her sister in Yorkshire about twice a year which 'Gives them a good day out. Good air. Only holidays they are likely to get' and that:

the family live on the charity of the Wood Street Mission ... when [husband] is well he helps organise games for poor children there on a Sunday afternoon for 3h. He does not get paid for this but at Christmas the Mission give him a big food parcel and a toy for the three children.

Amongst other extensive annotations (serial No. 6,352,429, SN: 1671). It seems that the interviewers employed for the *Poverty in the UK* study felt that the confines of a quantitative survey could not do full justice to the experiences related by their respondents. Neither, it seems, has justice been done to the interviewers and their

We met the children, outside our back door, long before we knew who their mother was, and we had known the children two weeks before we happened to be talking to Sam with Frank when the mother came up. She was a bit guarded at first, but soon opened up on the subject of the children. Frank's a very big baby, and she accepted our compliments with pride. She lives just over us and was worried in case they disturbed us (they did last night, with TV on after 11, but before that we never heard them). 'I swore I'd never have another flat. I wanted a house. We was in a flat before and the woman downstairs used to complain.' This was when the boys were little. She said, 'These stairs get me', and it's a shame to see her bumping the pram up the four flights of stairs to the landing. As a result we don't see a lot of Frank. Her mother was over on Sunday, and lives close by, just over the bridge in Broughton.

Figure 1. Extract from Marsden's fieldnotes on 'The family upstairs', June/July 1963, SN: 6225.

marginal notes. They are not acknowledged in the book arising from the research and the study is widely known as a quantitative survey.

As well as being unable to make confident pre-judgements to rule out classic survey data as numbers not words, we also had to reconsider our working distinction between primary data for analysis and contextual material. In particular, the *Salford* study is an ethnography, with Dennis Marsden, his wife at the time, Pat, and their two young children having spent a year and a half living on an estate alongside his research subjects. Dennis and Pat each kept diaries containing detailed descriptions of the families they lived amongst. While generating crucial contextual information, these entries also provide a powerful and vivid insight into the experiences and practices of families on the estate.

Our need to question and move beyond taken for granted precepts shaping current social research practice extended to definitions around researchers and respondents. Even the basic category of researcher is less than clear cut in our reuse of 1960s data, given the often significant roles played by the wives of the original investigators as well as peripatetic interviewing help. This input appears not to have gained them much recognition at the time, with wives' unpaid labour apparently expected as part of her duty to support her husband's work. For example, Dennis Marsden's ability to conduct the *Salford* study seems largely to have been dependent on the connections Pat Marsden established in the estate on which they lived as part of the ethnography.² From our contemporary and feminist informed perspective, it is important both to acknowledge Pat's contribution and to gain valuable insights from it, such as from her diary and photographs from the period. In contrast, our grasp of Peter Townsend's *Katharine Buildings* study has felt somewhat constrained by our inability even to identify the interviewer/s who worked with him on the study (who may or may not have included his then wife). Such use of a researcher's family within the field would be a subject for acknowledgement and reflection in current research practice, rather than the unremarkable convention apparent in the 1960s.

We have been able to gather substantial historical material to form the basis for our analysis, but as we have outlined, we are in no way comparing like with like. Contemporary interviews on the one hand are a very different form and nature to the brief but telling quotes and observations jotted down in the studies from the Townsend collection, and on the other hand, bear no resemblance to, and appear circumscribed in the light of the reflexive descriptions and remembered conversations that characterise much of the Marsden collection. Indeed, in order to analyse the material in *Mothers Alone*, for example, it becomes necessary to treat Marsden as a respondent in his own right rather than separate him off as a researcher (or as 'context') in order to decipher and make sense of the accounts he produced. Although all research might be regarded as a coconstruction, the now standard use of tape recording and verbatim transcription provides a clearer record of how accounts were produced in the moment, as well as an audible voice from participants.

In analysing the material from the 1960s, we are dependent largely on the short-term memory skills and interpretations of the original investigators. This reveals some further quite different conventions around what is now considered acceptable research practice to that of 40-odd years ago, to the extent that it existed.

Acceptable and unacceptable practice

In the *Salford* study, the investigators' lives were deeply intertwined with those they were researching. Many of the insights that that can be gained from the study derive from activities the Marsdens participated in directly. Dennis and Pat socialised with residents on the estate, babysat and lent and borrowed items. They also went on holiday to Blackpool with two of the estate families and Dennis' mother, an event that was fully detailed in Dennis' diary. The Marsdens' accounts of life on the estate provide us with more than just descriptions of how other people's family lives were conducted. Their interpretations were inevitably founded on their assumptions, values and expectations which in themselves are revelatory. In the same way that Peter Townsend was intellectually and politically committed to revealing and challenging inequality in his studies of people living in poverty, Dennis and Pat clearly felt empathy for the disadvantaged families they lived amongst and had a strong commitment to social change. But – as with all researchers and their fieldnotes, then and now – their narrations are often embedded, reflecting their class trajectories and standards, and most likely the pre-occupations of the day. For example, Pat observes how many sweets the estate children are given to eat and how often they are sent to 'Mr. Chippy' for their tea. She also details her struggles to avoid her young son being plied with sweets and biscuits. Dennis appears to have spent time in the local pubs and documents drinking habits, swearing in the presence of children and speculates about sexual impropriety in the case of some women.

From a current perspective, accounts of the research subjects in most of the original collections are often shockingly frank consisting of unfiltered and highly personal descriptions of their appearance and perceived intelligence. Sexist and racist assumptions pervade investigator accounts across the different studies, offending both present day moral sensibilities and conventions around research ethics. For example, mothers' physical attractiveness (or lack of it) is commented on, described as (amongst other things) 'well-preserved', 'greasy', 'spotty', 'fat', 'blowsy' and 'lacking sex appeal' (see Savage (2010), on the sexual and gendered stakes of male researchers seeking direct access to women's accounts at this time). Perceived intelligence and character was also subject to evaluation: 'Not too bright, rather vague' notes either Peter Townsend or an interviewer he was working with about the mother in Room 194 for the *Katharine Buildings* study (1962, SN: 4756) and '... very capable, extremely self-possessed to the point of being domineering' noted Dennis Marsden about a father he interviewed for the *ACE Parents and Education* study (Interview No. X2009, 1961, SN: 6224). Accent was commented upon as well: 'West Indian' mothers were judged difficult to comprehend and some bewilderment was expressed as to how they understood each other. Yet while such comments can make for uncomfortable reading today, they provide an enormously useful insight into the sensitivities and insensitivities of the time as well as the value judgements and ethical framework shaping the interpretations of the original investigators.

The engaging yet uncomfortable fieldnotes from these 1960s studies also highlight the relative sterility of our contemporary fieldnotes, which are routinely self-censored. Interview encounters are inevitably shaped by personal dynamics, observations and assessments that these days rarely are written down for fear of self-exposure. This raises some interesting questions around what is considered acceptable research practice. The comments and evaluations made by the original

researchers would now be considered unacceptable. Indeed, Marsden's descriptions have been the subject of criticism in particular (notably Evans & Thane, 2006). Nonetheless, such comments at least are owned, clearly stated and can now be factored into any analysis. The commonplace contemporary practice of editing out negative personal observations undoubtedly obscures this crucial interpersonal context. In this sense, current 'good' practice means can become 'bad' from the point of view of re-use ends, while the 'bad' practice ends of the past from the view point of the present can be 'good' for reanalysis means.

We would add that, while many of the standpoints and comments constituting the original studies now appear ignorant and distasteful, future generations might well view present day assumptions and moral frameworks as similarly suspect. For example, in years to come the routine demonisation and imprisonment of children and young people might be seen as a shocking indictment of our era or perhaps the extent to which poverty and inequality is currently blamed on mothering practices. Indeed, what is or is not considered of interest about how mothers and fathers bring up their children, and what evaluations are or are not made about their practices, at different points in time, is illuminating for our endeavour of assessing assertions about transformations in parenting.

Savage (2010) argues the assumption that observation as a mode of accessing knowledge pervaded 1960s sociological research, placing the (generally male) social scientists as intellectual and moral authorities. In the context of the judgemental tone characterising much of the original research material from the 1960s, a lack of moral commentary thus could be as telling, if not even more telling – highlighting how practices considered dubious today were unremarkable at that time. Specifically, children were often left to their own devices in a way that would be considered neglectful today. For example, as part his description of 'The family upstairs' (see Figure 1), Marsden wrote about an accident that had happened to a 6-year-old boy, Sam, in July 1963:

Sam had an accident that nearly killed him. A builder's ladder had been left and some boys of around 10 and 11 were manhandling it when it fell over (or was pushed) and fractured Sam's skull. It happened at 10.05 at night and he had to be rushed into hospital for a brain operation ... From the newspaper accounts it appears that no blame can be pinned on anyone (although the original story was that the ladder had been pushed over deliberately perhaps). (SN: 6225)

From a contemporary perspective, most striking about this account is the absence of discussion around parental responsibility. Marsden does not question whether a 6-year-old boy should have been left without adult supervision, outdoors and at this time of the evening. A similar incident today would likely lead to a child protection investigation and potentially even court proceedings against the parents. But in 1963, speculation about blame appears to have centred on the intentions of the older boys.

Another striking example of this very different context can be found in the notes on his interview with Mrs. Webster for the *Mothers Alone* study, with Marsden reflecting on how she is bringing up her 7-year-old daughter, June:

With the little girl June she seems rather over protective ... she takes June all the way to school which is quite a long way, possibly half an hours trip, just so that she can see her across the road. (Interview No. 109, August 1965, SN: 5072)

While these excerpts point to a dramatic change in understandings of children's capacities and welfare needs, also highlighted is the contingent and present-centred nature of the topic framing our work with classic archived studies – parenting – which do not transfer easily to the 1960s. At that period 'parenting' was not a commonly recognised term. The word 'parent' (more often termed 'mother' or 'father') related to an ascribed relationship rather than the practice or 'job' it tends to be described as now. While we can make observations about the kinds of help parents accessed then as opposed to now, any comparison is meaningless without a detailed understanding of the historically located meanings attached to child rearing.

Arguably, this is an important finding in its own right. Policy debates and broader concerns about contemporary parenting deficits are notably ahistorical in that they fail to acknowledge or engage with these changing understandings and expectations. Claims that a fracturing of traditional support systems and family relationships have made good parenting more difficult implicitly invoke a golden age in which good parenting was taken for granted. Yet, our analysis reveals accepted practices and values from the 1960s that in today's Britain would be viewed at best in terms of benign neglect and at worst as child abuse. The classic archived studies show young children left home alone, babies and toddlers often cared for by very young siblings, children roaming free without adult supervision and serious accidents as common. In the *Salford* study, many parents were depicted as drinking heavily and arguing loudly. Children were often filthy and sometimes smelly; they had very bad teeth, irregular bedtimes and regularly missed school.

Conclusion

Working with archived classic family and community studies, we contend, throws light on several assumptions about past and current acceptable research practice. Past conventions raise questions about the merging of primary data and context alongside who is active in the research field, while present understandings of 'good' ethical practice become a suspect narrative. Indeed, it was the unacceptable – in today's eyes – explicit value judgements within the archived data that enabled our indicative substantive findings about continuities and changes in family and parenting experiences and practices. Parenting practices that appear to have been unremarkable in the 1960s would today likely be condemned as neglectful. Mothers and fathers did not seem to have been held responsible and accountable for their young children's whereabouts, supervision and safety, habits and behaviour, to the same extent as they are today. While parenting practices and parents' own and others' expectations of their childrearing responsibilities may have changed across four decades, our findings make it difficult to argue that how parents bring up their children has declined from a previous golden apex.

Notes

1. Economic and Social Research Council Grant No. RES-000-22-3337.
2. Phyllis Willmott made a similar contribution to Michael Young and Paul Willmott's *Family and Kinship in East London* study (Young & Willmott, 1957).

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