

An Historical Comparative Analysis of Family and Parenting: A Feasibility Study Across Sources and Timeframes

**by
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- Marsden, 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.

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1. Introduction

In this Working Paper we lay out the process of a research project that assessed the feasibility of conducting qualitative secondary analysis and undertaking historical comparison in order to explore people's experiences of family and parenting practice, in an attempt to provide insights into the nature of social change and continuity over four decades.

Much academic, political and popular attention has been focused on the nature of transformations in contemporary family relationships and parental support systems since the mid-20th century. But how, methodologically, can social researchers move away from statistical overviews and rhetorical statements about the past from the viewpoint of the present, to compare family life and parenting practices and meaning across time? The 'Historical comparative analysis of family and parenting: a feasibility study across sources and timeframes', addressed this question. It used pilot thematic analytic questions about informal and formal support in parenting to examine the possibilities for, and viability of, working across different sorts of qualitative material – often referred to as 'scaling up' – across sources and timeframes. The sources involved were archived classic in-depth community and family studies conducted in the 1960s, held by the ESDS Qualidata archive. The scaling up across timeframes involved comparing findings from the analysis of the archived data with those from an existing recent data set, the *Resources in Parenting* study carried out in the early-mid 2000s (see Edwards and Gillies 2004, 2005, 2011; Gillies 2005, 2009; Gillies and Edwards 2006a, 2006b).

The process of historical comparison that we discuss was felt by some to be a risk methodologically, with uncertainties focusing on the ability to scale up across the two dimensions described above: working across diverse sets of archived studies and then across time. A certain model of working with 'clean' and directly commensurable raw data seems to underlie the concern about the ability to work across variable sorts of archived materials from several research projects. Yet it is clear that historians (objectivist, critical or whatever) have long been at ease using and drawing conclusions from disparate sources and types of documentary, visual and other material (e.g. Howell and Prevenier, 2001). Equally, there is an established strand of cross-national comparative work in the social policy field that finds its methodological and substantive way across variable data, different cultural terms and meanings, and distinct social and political structures and contexts (e.g. Hantrais and Mangen 1999). Further, as Mike Savage (2010) argues, and as we will show here, it is the very 'messiness' of archived qualitative data (rather than its cleanliness) that can provide alternative accounts of historical change. Nevertheless, rather than a standard project, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded us to undertake the smaller feasibility study described here, under grant number RES-000-22-3337.

Whatever the concerns, qualitative revisitation methodology research addressing social and generational change has been flourishing in recent years. In the following section of this Paper, we consider why such 'historical turns' might be occurring, before describing our historical comparative feasibility study in section 3. As part of elaborating the methodological process, in section 4, we then discuss our engagement with emergent ideas about descriptive assemblage in our efforts to develop a framework for working with context in the reanalysis of archived qualitative data, followed in section 5 by a consideration of the way that conventional research boundaries dissolve and then resolve in the type of historical comparative study we embarked upon, notably around qualitative/quantitative data, researcher/researched, and good/bad research practice. We then turn to consider some of the

substantive changes and continuities revealed by our historical comparative analysis. In section 6 we consider and contrast ideas about children's capacities and judgements about parental responsibility in the 1960s and 2000s, while in sections 7 and 9 respectively we address changes and continuities in the informal and formal support networks and services available to mothers and fathers at the two points in time. Our conclusion is that historical comparative analysis of accounts from different archived studies, and comparison of classic and contemporary studies, not only is possible, but further, it can generate useful insights into change and continuity in family and parenting.

2. Why an Historical Turn?

What might be called an historical turn in sociology appears to be underway amongst researchers who usually or often undertake contemporary qualitative empirical studies. In recent years, 'revisitation methodology research' addressing social and generational change (Edwards 2008a) has flourished. Within this methodology genre, there have been a number of family and community focused revisitation studies where researchers have – however loosely in the event – replicated previous research.¹ Recent examples include, Chris Phillipson and colleagues' (2001) restudy of community change and older people based on three important studies from the late 1940s and '50s: Sheldon's *Social Medicine of Old Age* (1948), and Young and Willmott's *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957) and *Family and Class in a London Suburb* (1960); Nickie Charles and colleagues' (2008a) contemporary replication of Rosser and Harris' influential study of family structures, lives and support in Cardiff, *The Family and Social Change* (1965); and Julia Johnson and colleagues' (2009) restudy of residential care homes for older people drawing on Townsend's classic *The Last Refuge* (1962). There have also been revisitation studies where original data and other material from a past study are reanalysed. Examples of such secondary analysis include Libby Bishop's (2007) reanalysis of data from Blaxter and Patterson's *Mothers and Daughters* (1982) and from Thompson's *The Edwardians* (1975) to look at the use of convenience foods; Mike Savage's exploration of class identities (2007) and Simon Duncan's exploration of change, continuity and individualisation in relation to family life (2010), both working with material lodged in the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex; and Graham Crow and Dawn Lyons' (2010) in progress re-look at Pahl's *Unemployed on the Isle of Sheppey* study (1985) through both reanalysis and replication.

An underlying question to this sort of academic historical turn is why now, over two decades after Francis Fukuyama posited the 'end of history' (1989), are social researchers so interested in revisitation methodology research, and in particular in reanalysis of older data?

There is, of course, a practical element to this. Research material has to be archived and available if it is to be revisited, now made easier through digitisation. In the UK, this accessibility is the case through the efforts of, initially Paul Thompson, and then others associated with the Qualidata archive, which was established in 1994 (Corti and Thompson 1998), and is now part of the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) servicing the UK Data Archive at Essex University.² ESDS Qualidata

¹ The terms used here, such as 'revisitation', 'replication', 'secondary analysis' and so on are all subject to contestation. As Martyn Hammersley (2010) has argued, however, such notes do mark out roughly defined areas, and where their specific meaning is clear in the discussion at hand they serve a use.

² See Till Geiger and colleagues (2010) for the seeds of a story of Qualidata.

and Essex University house both pioneering sociological studies and what some consider the contemporary studies that are the classics of the future, thus constructing the disciplinary canon. Further, Qualidata receives support from, amongst other sources, the ESRC both in terms of financial resources and in requiring data sets from research that it funds to be offered for archiving. This support encourages the impression that revisitation methodology research may gain ESRC funding.

There are though, we suggest, a range of other, more zeitgeist-related reasons for an 'historical turn' in sociology. Generally, there is a sense that people can only understand who they are now through knowing about their roots, and there is an intense interest in people uncovering their own family history and relatedness (Mason 2008). In the face of imputed individualistic and flexible projects of the self, whereby people are said now to be reflexive authors of their own biographies, creating their own identities, values and commitments, rather than following structurally predetermined pathways (Giddens 1992), the self as project appears to need to know about the stability or existence of the family traditions that supposedly it is bucking. More academically, in terms of what might be thought of as a project of the intellect, on an individual level, for example, Carol Smart (2007) has interrogated her family photograph album and family history to illustrate her arguments about personal life and family secrets, while Jeffrey Weeks (2007) has reflected on his own biography as part of what he neatly refers to as 'relating the present to the past in a constant move between an historic present and a living past' (Weeks, 2008, p.41) in making his case for a transformation of sexual and intimate life over the post-war period, and Miriam David (2003) similarly reviews her own biographical experiences as part of her examination of the shifting relationship between social and family change, political movements, policy and theorization. Again, perhaps the processes of detraditionalisation and disembedding of individuals and of society as a whole, freeing them from social rules, obligations and categories, mean that academics can feel a need to look to their roots to aid intellectual understanding of where society is going – or indeed revisit classic studies, as we discuss here.³

As well as individually, politically there is also the sense of a need to recover collective roots to know yourself. One example of this is the establishment of Black History Month, which aims to promote Black history, culture and heritage, and to disseminate information about positive contributions of Black people to British society (see <http://www.black-history-month.co.uk>). More directly related to revisitation, a political aspect plays itself out in moves to use archived material to create shared contemporary narratives about locality as a basis for social cohesion in diverse or deprived area:

Archives are a collection of personal and community recollections. They help us fit our personal memories into public memories ... By linking home experiences with archive texts, adults and children can share and gain knowledge about their communities which helps to build community cohesion (Fairfax-Cholmeley and Thomas, 2008: pp. 4, 7).

Social researchers can also be involved in these sorts of endeavours, as in an aspect of Crow and Lyons' work on Pahl's Sheppey study that brings together older and younger members in the area to

³ We are not arguing that such individual projects of the intellect are a completely new departure, as will be clear from our point about 'turns' later on. Classic reflections that come to mind (albeit not 'strictly' sociological) include Carolyn Steedman's interrogation of her childhood in 1950s London, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986), and Richard Hoggart's memoir of growing up in inter-war Leeds in the first half of *The Uses of Literacy* (1957). We are, though, suggesting that the practice has become more prevalent and mainstream, certainly for sociologists with well-established reputations.

help overcome negative generational stereotypes through dialogue between past, present and future images of local community (see <http://www.bluetownheritagecentre.com/project.html>).

Arguably, a sociological historical turn is a logical development following on the 'reflexive turn' in social science whereby there has been a shift in understandings of rigour, including through the influence of feminist and post-structuralist discussions (e.g. Denzin 1994; Grosz 1995; Harding 1992; May 1998). The reflexive turn has encompassed a move away from assertions of neutral objectivity in the production of knowledge towards bringing to light the politics of knowledge production. This includes making clear the social positioning of the knowledge producer and the pathway of how their ideas have developed, what Liz Stanley has called their 'intellectual (auto)biography' (1992). An historical turn then, perhaps extends this intellectual biography back into social and research biographies, in which researchers revisit and reflect on the social past and its creation through research. (It is an interesting paradox that it is the reflexive turn which has produced one of the more persistent arguments against the ability to work with archived qualitative research studies, as we discuss below in relation to context.)

In an introduction to an Anniversary issue of *The Sociological Review* entitled 'Reinscribing British Sociology' (56:4, 2008), Thomas Osborne and colleagues have made a case that the past of sociology is a sort of laboratory that we can make use of in the here-and-now to explore possibilities for the future of the discipline – what sociology is for. They say that this requires a focus on what sociologists actually did, how they pursued their work, and how they produced knowledge and thus society. On this basis, Osborne and his co-authors issue a self-acknowledged provocative call for a 'descriptive turn' in sociology, in a context where they say that established sociological reasoning is in a static and derivative predicament:

In the face of so many grand proclamations about epochal changes, we might want to champion some of [the] older and more modest, and yet more compelling, forms of empirically engaged, descriptive sociological reasoning that seek to render problems into thought, inscribe them, and conceptualise their connectedness without reduction or over-generalisation (*ibid* p. 532).

Perhaps an historical turn actually is part of a descriptive turn. Indeed, it may be that the whirling dervish nature of the many 'turns' that sociologists are supposed to have undertaken recently (biographic, cultural, descriptive, emotional, historical, material, narrative, psychoanalytic, reflexive, therapeutic, to name a few) collectively are all interlinked parts of a gradual and broader sensitising to cultural preoccupations.⁴

In our own case, a rejection of grand 'theoretical gestures and magisterial denunciations' (Osborne et al. 2008: 532) was the reason that we embarked upon our historical comparative endeavour based on secondary analysis of classic material, as we now describe.

⁴ As Andrew Abbott (2001) points out in his detailed consideration of the sociological concept of 'turning point', it is only retrospectively that we can judge whether there has been a 'turn' in the sense of a change from one trajectory to another, or whether what at the time may seem like a 'turn' is actually part of a more sustained trajectory. We are suggesting the latter.

3. The Historical Comparative Analysis of Family and Parenting Study

Much academic, political and popular attention is focused on the nature of transformations in contemporary family relationships and parental support systems since the mid-twentieth century. Such discussions are primarily structured around the premise that social and economic changes have influenced the way that people relate to one another, for good or for ill (see overviews in Edwards 2004, 2008b; Gillies 2003, 2008). On the one hand, a breakdown of established social ties is seen as leading to the disintegration of moral frameworks. Family relationships are said to be characterised by a fracturing of traditional support systems and a decline in values of duty and responsibility, placing great strain on the institution of the family, drastically undermining supports for good parenting and thereby damaging social cohesion more generally. On the other hand, a more optimistic view of social change suggests that a greater diversity and plurality of lifestyles generates new opportunities for the resources that parents can draw on for support. Rather than a base in duty and obligation, new families of choice are marking the generation of alternative social networks and resources.

Against this backdrop of asserted transformations in parenting, we carried out a study of support in parenting focusing on the resources accessed by mothers and fathers of 8 to 12 year old children. We confined our attention to parents of children in this 'middle childhood' age range, rather than covering 'children' per se from toddlers to teenagers, in contrast to surveys and studies that investigate parents generally. While not adhering to a developmental model of childhood ourselves, the trajectory 'stage' of middle childhood is defined by contemporary 'expert' knowledge as one in which, amongst other things, children are in transition between being significantly embedded in and dependent on familial relationships and parents, and developing their own relatively autonomous peer relationships (e.g. Borland et al. 1998; Meadows 1990; Terwogt and Harris 1993), in a present context where parents are held firmly responsible for their children's behaviour and development at this age. Parents of children in 'middle childhood' are thus defined, and may understand themselves, as facing some different issues in accessing resources to those involved in the parenting of toddlers or teenagers. We pursued our interest in the resources available to and used by mothers and fathers in bringing up their children through a representative national survey of 1112 parents focusing on public norms around support, followed by theoretically sampled qualitative interviews with mothers and, where available, fathers in 27 households to examine their everyday resource practices (Edwards and Gillies 2004, 2005).

In the *Resources in Parenting* study, we found that the social resources available to parents were inextricably linked with economic and cultural resources, and varying by gender as well as social class (Edwards and Gillies 2004, 2005). We also found that the parents in our UK-wide sample were generally not isolated or unsure about who to turn to for support. But we could say very little about whether or not this involved change or continuity in parenting practices and resources, and thus felt unable to address a key debate in our substantive field. Consequently, as noted in our Introduction, we turned to think about how, methodologically, we could compare past and contemporary detailed practices and meanings in the constitution of family life and parenting.

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 (Gillies and Edwards 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 resources. While family forms may change, content may endure, or vice versa (Charles et al. 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 2010). 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 and Wilson 2008; Goulbourne 2006).

We thus embarked upon the historical comparative study outlined in our Introduction, attempting to provide insights into the nature of social change and continuity over four decades, working across multiple sources of archived classic data from the 1960s and bringing this into dialogue with findings from this classic data with those from our more recently collected research accounts. One way forward that has been identified for scaling up across several qualitative studies (of whatever time period) is the pursuance of common substantive questions and analytic foci across the diverse data sets (e.g. Phillipson 2008; the Timescapes initiative: www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk). Thus, for the feasibility study we selected two issues, or findings that had emerged from our contemporary study to provide a 'test' focus for the possibilities of 'scaling up' across archived sources and across time.

The first issue relates to informal support networks. Our contemporary finding was that parents' friendship networks provided significant day-to-day support (Edwards and Gillies 2004, 2005; Gillies and Edwards 2006b). While normative expectations of family as providing unconditional support remained strong, actual experiences were more ambivalent, however. Mothers and sisters tended to provide help, but parents got most of their practical and emotional support from friends. In scaling up across archived material then, we wanted to find out whether experiences of support networks were family or friendship based. And in scaling up across time, we focused on whether the support networks used by parents had changed over a forty year period.

The second test focus issue relates to the issue of formal support. Our contemporary finding was that parents see professional support as limited to longstanding welfare issues such as children's education and health. Advice on parenting was often experienced as intrusion. In the 1960s, welfare professionals were relatively new, so in scaling up across archived studies of the period we were interested to know how they were viewed and experienced by parents. And in scaling up across time, we focused on whether understandings and use of professional support had changed over a forty year period.

Interestingly, in the light of assertions about social change, social research carried out in the 1960s was also often preoccupied 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 contemporary study in fact, then, is a continuous political and disciplinary theme across the two time frames for our historical comparison.

Although research on families was conducted in the 1960s, relevant themes to our study (resources in parenting and family life) may be 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.

Table 1: *Classic Sociological Collections and Studies Used in the Historical Comparative Analysis of Family and Parenting*

Collection:	Study	Key topics and location:
DENNIS MARSDEN	ACE Parents and Education 1960-61	parental decisions about education, resources and philosophies, United Kingdom
	Salford Slum and Re-housing 1962-63	rehousing of slum population on central redevelopment estate and over-spill area, employment, working class family life, working class community life, Salford
	Mothers Alone 1965-66	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 1957-62 ⁵	social change, housing, urban communities, urban renewal, working class life, family life, community life, rented accommodation, tenants, tenancy, East London
	Poverty in the UK 1967-68	poverty, deprivation, employment, unemployment, disabled, family, one parent families, children, elderly, housing, household budgets, living standards, nutrition, health, United Kingdom

As we worked through these collections, identifying relevant material, we began charting our research processes of selection and understanding, aware of concerns about the extent to which detailed, situated studies can be re-analysed. While secondary analysis of quantitative data is well-established and proceeds from an understanding that such data exists independently from the researcher, in reflexive qualitative approaches the relationship between researcher and researched, and the interactions that produce data, are regarded as a core aspect of interpretation. As a result, the original context in which data is, or was, collected is central to any qualitative analysis. Martyn Hammersley (1997), for example, has described the ‘cultural habitus’ that is acquired through direct involvement in fieldwork, and suggests that the key role of this intuitive knowledge and experience

⁵ Interestingly for our project of carrying out a study comparing historical and contemporary data on family and parenting, this unpublished study had the same intention. The data from Peter Townsend’s and others’ interviews with the inhabitants of Katharine Buildings in the late 1950s and early 1960s were to be compared with the data recorded on the inhabitants of the Buildings around 70 years earlier by Beatrice Webb, in an effort to trace continuities and changes in working class family life in the East End over the period. It seems that Townsend recognised the need to pursue a form of investigative biography when proposing the study to Michael Young in a letter dated 5 April 1957: ‘What I am saying is that it would be difficult to investigate properly this experience of Beatrice Webb without tracing it in the context not only of her life but in the context of the whole development of social thought and research’ (SN: 4756).

limits the usability of other people's data (see also Mauthner et al. 1998). Advocates of secondary analysis have responded to such concerns by pointing out that reanalysis is more productively viewed as a recontextualisation and reconstructing of material, amounting to a primary analysis of a different order of data (Corti 2000; Corti and Thompson 2004; Heaton 2004; Moore 2006). As Hammersley (2010) has latterly made clear, however, it is not a matter of polarities, of on the one hand a clear-cut distinction between original and re-use, or on the other hand a matter of no distinction between them, but rather a matter of degree where re-use has more of a tendency towards limited aspect to context.

Indeed, knotty issues remain in attempts at reanalysis of historically located data. Efforts to explore social change and understand its meaning encounter the complexities associated with an interpretation of the past from the viewpoint of the present (Edwards 2008b; Gillies 2008). The context and focus of such studies shift over time, generating numerous epistemological and methodological issues for revisiting historically and culturally specific data sets (Aull Davies and Charles 2002; Charles et al. 2008b; Phillipson 2008). As part of our efforts to address such issues of recontextualisation and epistemological shifts, and feeling the weight of our funding as a feasibility project with a point to prove about our ability to scale up across studies and timeframes, we began mapping our methodological process questions and actions. Stimulated by our reading around the issues – notably the special issue of *The Sociological Review* (56:4, 2008) mentioned above as part of our exploration of shifts of thought in the history of British sociology – we began to engage with ideas about a descriptive turn in order to help organise and understand our emergent process, and then to develop a practice framework.

4. A Descriptive Framework: Assemblage

Advocates of the need for a descriptive turn in social research (Osborne et al. 2008; Savage 2009; Savage and Burrows 2007, 2009) warn that the prolific and routine collection of transactional social data on whole populations that is occurring as part of capitalist dynamics is challenging academic authority in social research:

... a world inundated with complex processes of social and cultural digitization; a world in which commercial forces predominate; a world in which we, as sociologists, are losing whatever jurisdiction we once had over the study of the 'social' as the generation, mobilization and analysis of social data become ubiquitous (Savage and Burrows 2009: 763).

Examples of the extensive data of 'knowing capitalism' that they give include that associated with supermarket loyalty cards, websites and servers, market research omnibuses, and private sector geodynamic classification tools. Sociology, then, they say, needs to carve out a different role for itself. Savage in particular (2009) argues that sociology should be pursuing different methods of assemblage which enable a sociological descriptive turn; critiquing the generation of categories and groups through transactional research technologies rather than attempting to be in competition with them, and being more creative with other fluid methods. A particular example of creative and fluid methods that Savage gives is visual inscription devices such as maps, plans, diagrams and figures.

At the heart of the descriptive turn is a concern with addressing the connections in social relations and meticulously tracing and conceptualising the associations between things:

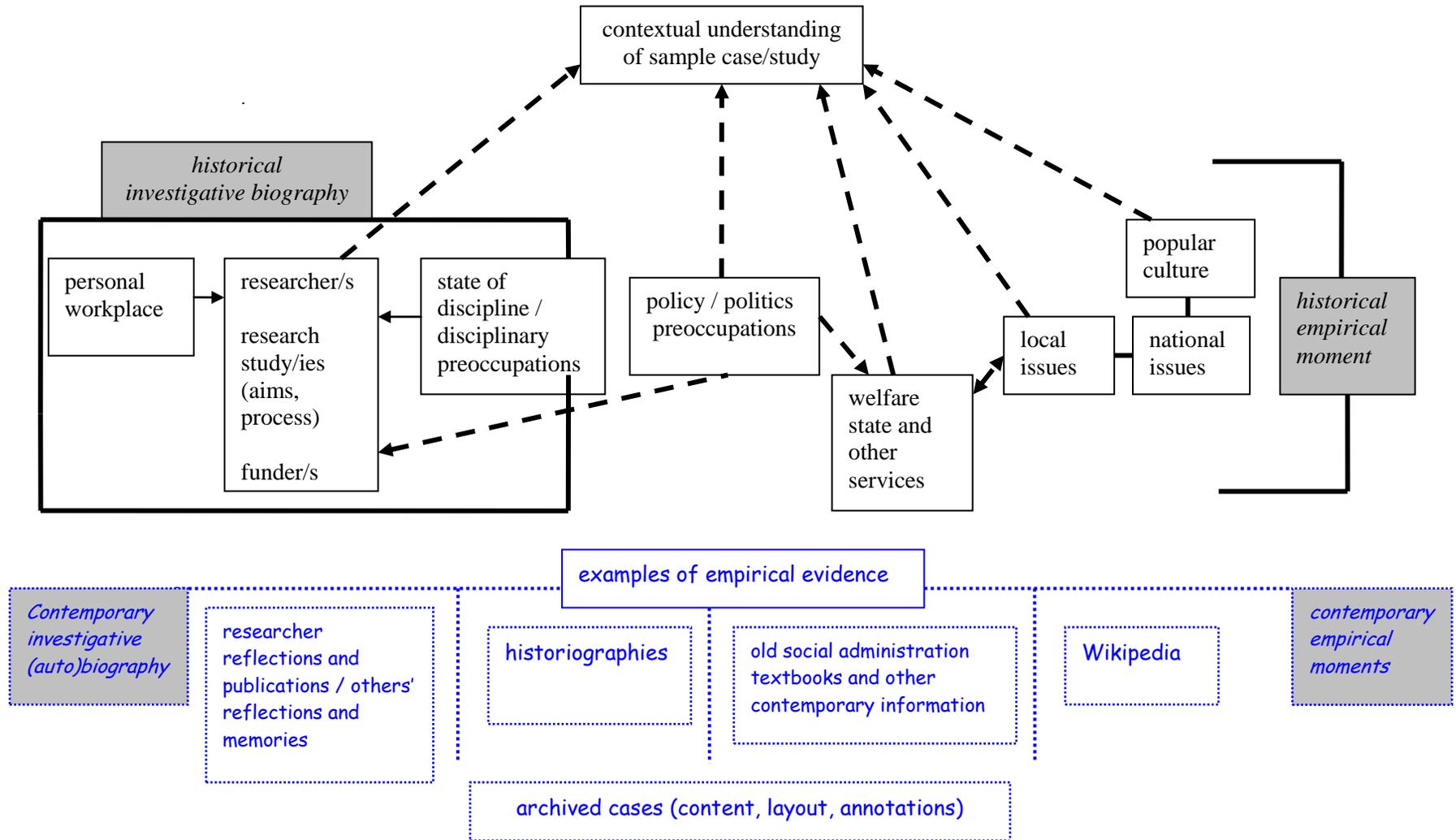
... one should not oppose description to conceptualisation: the act of making connections is conceptual, and the concepts that make thought a matter of doing and not merely of reflection connect things purposefully and thus reveal links that would otherwise remain below the threshold of visibility. We can begin to see how a rejection of the search for deep determinants in favour of surface connections marks the emergence of a new epistemic formation ... for description is the way to grasp complexity in thought in order to make it amenable to action (Osborne et al. 2008: 530).

There are few accounts of the processes of the identification and construction of context for both original studies and for revision by reanalysts. Libby Bishop (2007) provides a notable exception. She builds on analyses of context in interview interactions to lay out guidelines for what recontextualisation of archived qualitative data might look like in detail. This useful contribution, however, did not help us in all respects. Importantly, as Table 1 shows, we are working across collections of studies by researchers, rather than treating each interview event and research project as distinct. Further, in the classic studies we have explored, social researchers tended to work with observational fieldnotes and reconstructed speech rather than the audio recordings with which Bishop deals. In a sense, for us, the original researchers become an overtly present form of informant or participants in the contemporary study – a point that we return to later on in discussing the dissolving and resolving boundaries in our research process. A good example of the style of fieldnotes that we are dealing with is provided by an extract from one of Marsden's notes as part of his *Salford Slum and Re-housing Study*, concerning 'The family upstairs, immediately above' the flat that he and his family had moved into as part of this participant observation study, reproduced here in Figure 1.

Figure 1: *Extract from Marsden's Fieldnotes on 'The Family Upstairs',
June/July 1963, SN: 6225*

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 2: Descriptive Methodological Framework for Reanalysis of Archived Data



In addressing these sorts of issues in re-use of classic qualitative archived data sets, we found the epistemic formation at the core of the descriptive turn illuminative. Drawing on this notion, we have attempted to provide an emergent methodological framework based on an assemblage of our research process. We represent this diagrammatically in Figure 2, in the spirit of ideas about the visual in the descriptive turn. We first discuss the construction of the Figure, and then offer some illustrative assemblage examples from our secondary analysis research process.

The top half of the visual framework represents our attempts to understand the classic data sets that we are working with, as embedded in the context of their production. There are two key organising concepts in understanding these contexts, noted in the in-filled grey boxes. The first concept is 'investigative biography', to refer to the knowledge production process of the original researchers, their stances towards particular sets of problems and their articulation of them in certain styles. This concept amalgamates the term 'investigative personality' used by Osborne and colleagues (2008) to capture and denote the importance of the 'character', 'stamp' and 'personal mark' of nineteenth century 'practically-minded social researchers' (2008: 522-3)⁶, with Stanley's analytic notion of 'intellectual biography' that we referred to earlier in discussing the reflexive turn. The amalgamation has the advantage of pulling together ontology and epistemology, highlighting the issues of, respectively, investigative approach and the process of intellectual understanding, for the original researcher or researchers positioned in time and space.

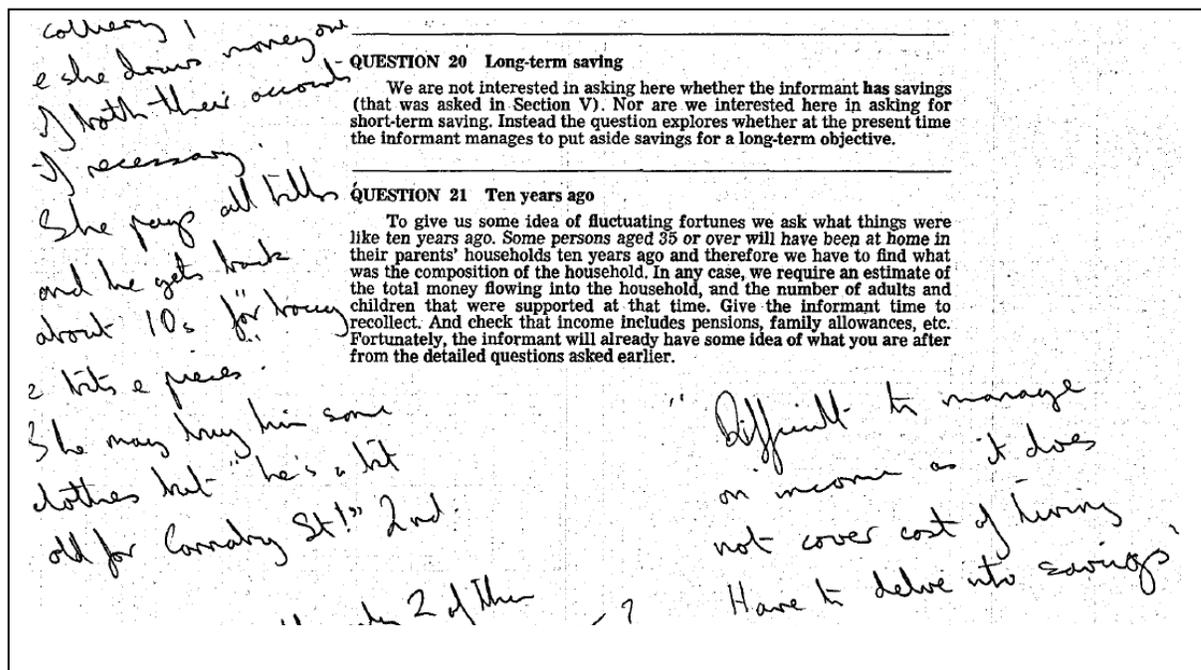
In the visual representation of our descriptive methodological framework for reanalysis, we have adapted the term to 'historical investigative biography' (see grey box) to signal clearly its application to archived classic sociological studies conducted during the 1960s. In the white boxes encompassed within the organising concept of historical investigative biography in Figure 2, then, we include not just the researcher/s as the conductor/s of a specific project or sets of projects that had particular aims and were funded from particular sources, but also other features shaping original researchers' investigative approaches and intellectual processes. Here we have noted the way that the state and preoccupations of the researchers' discipline at the point in time would have been influential, as well as the bearing of the researchers' personal and workplace relations and networks.

The second organising concept is 'empirical moments', a broad notion that we use in an attempt to encompass the context of the societal 'states of play' at the time, in terms of policy and politics, service provisions, and cultural and other local and national issues (see white boxes). Again, we preface this concept with the term 'historical' in the grey box in the top part of our Figure 2 to signal our concern with archived classic data. There are, of course, many forms of connective relations between our organising concepts and the aspects that comprise them, as the descriptive turn highlights. We have attempted to indicate these interactions with dotted arrow lines on our Figure. For others adapting this descriptive methodological framework for mapping their own reanalysis of qualitative data from archived studies, around the key organising concepts of investigative biography and empirical moments, the white boxes that comprise these concepts will vary according to the particular collection or study under consideration.

⁶ This idea is developed from Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose's (1997) use of '*personae*' to refer to such figures, itself acknowledged as adapted from Deleuze and Guattari's (1994) 'conceptual *personae*'. 'Investigative personality' is also a category in Holland's Personality Types, widely used in the vocational and careers development field (see <http://www.hollandcodes.com>). In the Holland typology an investigative personality is analytical, intellectual, reserved, independent and scholarly.

In respect of specific contextual assemblage, while the top part of the descriptive methodological framework in Figure 2 indicates the historical context that we feel that we need to understand in order to work with the data from the archived classic studies, the lower part, distinguished by dotted lines, offers indications of our assemblage process – that is, some examples of the range and sorts of materials that we have looked at in pursuit of this understanding.⁷ Additionally, at the bottom of Figure 2 is an unexpectedly (for us) valuable feature of the archived data: its materiality. The ways that schedules and fieldnotes are laid out, and the way that interview notes have been written up, as well as the annotations on them, are fascinating. For example, different sets of handwriting in Marsden’s *ACE Parents and Education* study papers alerted us to the presence of other people in the field alongside him, and in particular indicated what was then confirmed in the *Salford Slum and Rehousing Study* material – the supportive part played by his wife of the time in the conduct of his early fieldwork. And while Peter Townsend’s *Poverty in the UK* survey has been digitised as a statistical data set, the archived paper copies of the survey booklets sometimes contain fascinating hand-written annotations by the interviewer, giving informative detailed contextual information and quotations from respondents (see Figure 3). We return to this issue again in discussing disruptions to boundaries in research later in this Paper.

Figure 3: *Extract from Townsend’s Poverty in the UK Annotated Survey Booklet No. 542-3101, July 1968, SN: 1671*



Continuing our example of working with the Dennis Marsden collection, gaining a sense of the historical investigative biography here has involved us discussing his work with Marsden himself prior to his death in September 2009 (Edwards 2008b), as well as reading Marsden’s own reflections on

⁷ The indicative boxes do not contain all the material we have looked at in our efforts to grasp at context, only examples. To map and list all of the specific sorts and sources of material we have accessed and consulted is unnecessary in terms of the arguments pursued here, and on a practical level would have resulted in a very large and unwieldy Figure.

his life and work from interviews, presentations and publications (for example, Marsden 1968). Savage's interview with Elizabeth Bott about her research strategy, when he was working with her *Family and Social Network* study (2005), and Crow and Lyons' discussions with Ray Pahl (2010) can be seen in this historical investigative biography light as well. We have also read colleagues' reflections on working with Marsden where possible, and spoken with some of them as well as his first wife. We have also consulted some brief reflections from other re-users of his archived studies (for example Evans and Thane 2006; Kynaston 2005), and are aware of the debate around observational aspects of Marsden's investigative personality (Geiger 2010). In contrast, our inability to find anyone or any source that could tell us anything about the research process for Peter Townsend's *Katharine Buildings* study has left us feeling that aspects of understanding context for this piece of work are beyond our grasp.

The concept of historical investigative biography has also shaped our decisions about working our way through the various studies we have identified, approaching Marsden's three studies and Townsend's two studies as collective sets each produced by a particular investigator over time, rather than separate projects, for example, to embed this sense of an investigative biography.

In order to gain some familiarity with the historical empirical moments, we have, for example, consulted social administration texts books of the period. We were puzzled by the role of probation officers in lone mothers' lives at the time, since many of the mothers interviewed for Marsden's *Mothers Alone* study made reference to them. Phyllis Willmott's roughly contemporaneous guide to social services (1967/1976) enlightened us that one aspect of probation officers' work at the time was marital. In matrimonial disputes the court could ask them to see if a reconciliation was possible, and if not advise the court about the children's welfare. People might also approach probation officers for advice about marriage problems themselves. The instructions to interviewers in the paper copies of Townsend's *Poverty in the UK* survey booklets give a lot of useful detail about average standards of living, expectations, and benefit levels at the time (see Figure 4). And more specifically, several references to *Love on the Dole* in Marsden's *Salford Slum and Rehousing* material resulted in a googled Wikipedia entry explaining that it was a novel published in 1933 (later adapted as a play and a film) about working class poverty amongst people living in the Hanky Park area of Salford, where the author, Walter Greenwood, was born and brought up, and obviously still resonant in that very slum re-housing area studied by Marsden in the early 1960s.

Finally, in the lower section of our descriptive methodological framework in Figure 2 we again have in-filled grey boxes for our organising concepts, mirroring those in the top part. Niamh Moore (2006) has pointed out that, in the debate about context and the reuse of archived data, the context of the original study has been reified and privileged over considerations about the context of the setting up and production of the reanalysis project – the making of new data out of old that we referred to above:

Certain contexts have been privileged, such as the context of the original research, and specifically the role of reflexivity in the production of data. In this sense context is reduced to reflexivity, and other contexts are then lost, such as the contemporary context of the current research project, and reflexivity around this project (*ibid*, p. 2)

In this respect, as well as mapping the sorts of assemblage of context that we have just discussed and illustrated, we also need to acknowledge and reflect on the contemporary investigative

(auto)biography of our own study and its contemporary empirical moment (for example, Edwards and Gillies 2005).

Such reflections, in part, bring us full circle, back to the reasons for revisiting classic data sets that we proposed as the context for our own and others' historical turn. They also point us towards the way that conventional research boundaries dissolved and needed to be resolved in the type of historical comparative study we embarked upon.

Figure 4: *Extract from Townsend's Poverty in the UK Survey Booklet: Instructions for Questionnaire on Household Resources and Standards of Living in the United Kingdom, 1967-68*

depending on the nature of the usual employment.

QUESTION 15
 This is laid out as concisely as possible on one page and you are asked to ring 01, 02, 03, etc., as appropriate and then to enter the rates per week and amounts below, carefully writing in the code "01" (i.e. Family Allowances) "02" (i.e. Retirement Pension) and so on so that we are clearly aware of the allowances to which the amounts refer.

Amounts will sometimes be joint—e.g. retirement pension for man and wife—or will be for several members of the household—e.g. sickness benefit for man and wife and children. In these instances the amount should be entered (if necessary, after the interview) in one column only, under that member of household receiving the payment. Wherever possible encourage informants (especially when elderly) to show you the allowance or pension book.

CODE 01 Family Allowances

	First child	Second	Third	Fourth & subsequent
up to April 1968	nil	8s.	10s.	15s.
after April 1968	nil	15s.	17s.	17s.

counting children under 15 or up to 19 if still in full-time education or college or an apprentice on low wages.

CODE 02 Retirement Pension
 Note that the actual amounts vary widely. Increased pensions are paid if retirement is deferred. There are now in addition small graduated state pensions (averaging about 3s.) and pensions may be reduced because of earnings or a deficient contribution record. Note that some of these points also apply to other benefits. Pensions and supplementary benefits can be combined in a single payment. You will be prompting for supplementary benefit and wherever possible we should like you to list the amount separately (as well as the fact that it is being received). But whenever the rate given to you exceeds the standard rate below you should check the reason.

Single person (husband)	£4 10s. 0d.
Wife's income	£2 16s. 0d.
1st dependent child	£1 5s. 0d.
2nd dependent child	17s. 0d.

CODE 03 Standard Widow's Pension
 Note: not the widow's allowance which is paid for the first 26 weeks after widowhood.

Widow or widowed mother	£4 10s. 0d.
1st dependent child	£2 2s. 6d.
2nd child	£1 14s. 6d.
3rd and subsequent child	£1 12s. 6d.

Depending on the circumstances of the death of the husband (armed service and so on) widows' pensions may differ in size. Note that family allowances are received in addition to dependent children's allowances.

Widow's Allowance: Widow £6 7s., children as for widow's pension

CODE 04 and 05 Sickness Benefit and Unemployment Benefit
 Sickness benefit is often paid for periods other than a week. Find what was the last payment and for how many days (excluding Sundays). A payment for 6 days, excluding Sunday, makes up a "week's" benefit. Note that an earnings-related supplement may be paid in addition to the flat rate benefits listed below. Moreover, these benefit rates depend on the contribution record.

Single person	£4 10s. 0d.
Married woman	£2 16s. 0d.
1st dependent child	£1 5s. 0d.
Each subsequent child	17s. 0d.

CODE 06 Supplementary Benefit

5. Dissolving and Resolving Boundaries in the Research Process

Undertaking our historical comparative study and visualising our emergent descriptive framework forced us to rethink many of our implicit assumptions about our research process and boundaries. Attempting to conduct an historical comparative analysis brings into sharp relief many of the taken for granted expectations and conventions governing contemporary social science, in particular what gets recognised as a qualitative dataset, a researcher and good research practice. The boundaries between distinct elements of social research and its process dissolved themselves in disconcerting ways. We now discuss our resolving of these issues.

5.1 Qualitative and quantitative dataset boundaries

At a fundamental level we had to re-consider what should qualify as a qualitative data for us to investigate. In drawing up our research proposal for the feasibility study, we specified that up to five 'accounts' would be taken from each study we selected as feasible sub-samples. This sort of definition of process provided us – and those assessing our proposal on behalf of the ESRC – with a reassuringly clear research plan, but it relied on a greater match between the historical and contemporary data than was actually the case. The accounts taken from our recent *Resources in Parenting* research consisted of detailed semi-structured interviews, tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. They are the type of material that the guidelines for what recontextualisation of archived qualitative data might look like (discussed above) are referring to. 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 above provided an example from the *Salford Slum and Rehousing Study*, and Figure 5 gives another, more extended, example from the *Mothers Alone* 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 (see Figure 6). This example highlights how the distinction between quantitative and qualitative data is not always clear cut. Further, as we illustrated with Figure 3 above, we found that the 1967/67 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 margin 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 3 hrs. 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. 6352429, SN: 1671).

Figure 5: *Extract from Marsden's Interview Notes for Mrs. Campbell, March 1966 (Interview No. 014), SN: 5072*

- 7 -

can manage, I'm alright. I had so much debt when my husband left me, and it took me so much worry and trouble, sorting it all out that I said to myself, 'If I got turned round, I'd never go into doubt again'. And I haven't done, I've never had any clubs since then because it's not worth it, the worry it causes. I've no time going looking what other people have, either. I think that you find, when you're in my position that the children take all your time. I might say to myself, 'Well, I think next week, I'll buy so-and-sd'. But then, the children come home from school, and they want 3/6d. for this, or they've torn their coat on a piece of railing, or something like that, and there it goes. And I'm not much at a hand for sewing, but I've tried my best. ~~Look~~ at this." Proudly, **she** produced a Brownie's uniform. "I asked them how much it would cost to buy a dress like this, and they said 15/-. So I thought, I can do as well as that, and I bought a piece of material for 5/-, and I ran it up myself. Same with this." She produced another, a romper suit for the baby. "Round here, with them all working in the mill, they can all get bits of cloth, and they sell it to me cheap, or give it me." She can do this for the two little ones, but she can't do it for the older boy, Michael, who is very particular about what he wears.

Family

Her father has had cancer for eight years, and this strictly limits what her mother can do for her. Also, her mother lives at three-quarters of an hour away, over on the other side of the town. Last night when I called, to try and get an interview, the mother, and an aunt, had just come over for the first time in 18 months to allow Mrs. Campbell to go out to a Church meeting, which she was particularly anxious to attend. "They'll never come to eat my things." ^{They won't even have a cup of tea} They always say, 'What you've got is for you, and for your own, and we're not going to start living off you'. Whenever they come they bring a bottle of milk, and they always bring their own tea. They always bring enough food to cover what they eat, and a bit over. And when I was out last night, the children were supposed to have had their supper but when I came back, they had fish and chips, and creamed slices. They got spoilt last night." My aunty's just like a second mother to us, because she got married, and she never had any children, so when we were little, she always used to bring us up. And she's very good." Her mother was a widow, and had to bring the children up by herself. Then she got married again, a man with two children of her own, much younger. And these two children, "They are really better than my own. My step brother and sister are more use to me." The step sister works, or used to work, up at the mill nearby, Joseph Hoyles. Before she started courting, Mrs. Campbell saw her every day, and quite often she'd collect the little girl and take her down to her Grandma's. As it is, Michael goes down to his Grandma's every Tuesday and Friday, and has his tea. "And she always gives him a couple or oranges and a bag of spice." (Spice = sweets) And there are always small sums of money which Mrs. Campbell can't really compute, or affects not to be able to, which amounts to 1/6d. to 2/- a week for each child. The brother and sister are always handing out six-pences and shillings and the children get a great deal of pocket money in this way.

Figure 6: Extract from Townsend's Survey Document for Room 189, 1962, SN: 4756

9. Have you any friends living in this building? (meaning someone who often comes into your flat or you go into theirs)?

Yes.
 No.

10. Are the other people in the building friendly or not?
(In what ways)?

(E.g. Do they help one another in sickness? Can you give me a recent example?)

You don't need to be lonely in the buildings - if you're friendly, they're friendly.
Can borrow from friends
has washing machine
reciprocally. knock up to work.

11. Do you have any relatives living in Stepney whom you see regularly?

Mother comes monthly to visit
Sister comes for dinner everyday: 3.

Grandma - once a week. Yes. No. Don't visit very far - only on way to Ringo.

12. Do you have any friends living in Stepney whom you see regularly?

Yes.
 No.

It seems that 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. These marginal notes could have been subjected to a qualitative analysis. Indeed, it seems they were in a partial way. In a paper titled 'An annotated bibliography of my research work' written by Dennis Marsden in 1998, he commented:

During his time at Essex [Townsend] became essentially a quantitative researcher. I vividly remember experiencing a pang of regret when he was (as I felt) 'reduced to' searching the margins of questionnaires for qualitative material to bring greater immediacy to *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (p.5).⁸

Similarly, while it consists largely of quantitative surveys, John Goldthorpe and David Lockwood's classic *Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* study (1961-62) also contains much useful qualitative material on family life during this period as part of the contextual fieldnotes. Very little of the qualitative data was used in Goldthorpe and Lockwood's published work (though later made use of by Savage, 2005). In the case of both the *Poverty in the UK* and *Affluent Worker* studies, however,

⁸ Indeed, the example of the booklet extensively annotated by Ian J. McCannah that we give on page 19 became case 1 in Townsend's *Poverty in the UK* book.

we were overwhelmed by the sheer volume of questionnaires and, apart from a couple of test cases from the 1960s *Poverty in the UK* study, we were unable to pursue them in the lifetime of our small feasibility project.

The order of material that we were dealing with, the mix of observations and remembered quotes, and marginal annotations, calls into question conventional understandings of the position of the original researcher as somehow separable from their data – even if still linked through conceiving of them as ‘context’, just as we had done in our descriptive framework diagram (see Figure 2). As we now discuss, the original researchers and those helping them could dissolve the implicit boundary between producers of the classic studies that we were revisiting and the sub-samples of subjects in our feasibility revisitation.

5.2 Researcher and researched boundaries

Our focus on discrete units of data that could be described as interviews spanned a wide range of formats, from lengthy descriptive accounts to brief summaries of, or comments on, family circumstances. As well as readjusting our sub-sample sizes to reflect this inconsistency, we were also forced to reconsider our working distinction between primary data for analysis and contextual material. In particular, the *Salford* study is an ethnography, with Dennis Marden, 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. While material from the study includes some formal interviews very few are with parents of 8 to 12 year olds. But 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 four families with children in the appropriate age range, leading us to include them in our sub-sample.

Our need to question and move beyond taken for granted precepts shaping contemporary social research practice also extended to definitions around researchers and respondents. Even the basic category of researcher is less than clear cut in our revisitation 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. From our contemporary and feminist informed perspective – and in the context of elaborating the historical investigative biography element of our descriptive framework – it seems important both to acknowledge Pat’s contribution and to gain valuable insights from it. With Dennis terminally ill at the time and unable to participate in our research we turned to Pat, who was able to provide important contextual information, as well as the copy of her unarchived diary and photographs from the period which we subsequently drew on as original data. And we have already noted that our grasp of the ‘historical investigative biography’ and of the context of Peter Townsend’s *Katharine Buildings* has felt somewhat constrained by our inability even to identify the interviewer who worked with him on the study.

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. Our contemporary interviews with mothers and fathers 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 co-construction, 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. This may have the consequence of stronger sense of resolved boundaries between research, researchers and respondents. In contrast, in analysing the material from the 1960s we are dependent largely on the short term memory skills and interpretations of the original investigators, with dissolving and very partial boundaries between research, researcher and subject quite evident. And this dissolution reveals some quite different conventions around what is now considered good research practice to that of forty-odd years ago, to the extent that it existed.

5.3 Good and bad practice boundaries

This issue of dissolving boundaries in relation to researcher and subject is particularly to the fore in relation to the *Salford* study where 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 preoccupations 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 any hint of sexual impropriety among 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 dismissed as 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 are rarely written down for fear of self exposure. This raises some interesting questions around what is considered good research practice. The comments and evaluations made by the original researchers would now be considered unacceptable. Indeed, as we noted in discussing our descriptive framework, Marsden's descriptions have been the subject of criticism in particular (notably Evans and 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. The detailed and honest notes surviving from the '60s have allowed us to carry out a comparative analysis of attitudes that would not otherwise have been possible (see Caballero and Edwards', 2010, comparison of the attitudes faced by contemporary lone mothers of mixed racial and ethnic children, and supports that they can access, with their counterparts in the 1960s drawing on data from Marsden's *Mothers Alone* study).

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 demonization 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.

As Mike Savage (2010) points out, it is important to avoid the easy lure of a developmental, progressive account of disciplinary and methodological histories in which research practices and sensibilities are narrated as having evolved and improved. He argues that the 1960s was a period in which the specifically sociological qualitative interview about everyday life was emergent practice in uncharted territory. While researchers had a clear sense of their own importance, the lack of clarity in researcher-researched relationships and how they were to treat each other is evident in the material that comprises the archived studies. In particular, Savage contends that the recorded interest in research subjects' physical appearance shows that social researchers had not yet distinguished their visual observation from the words comprising the research subjects' elicited narratives. In contrast contemporary research practice removes the subject as physicality (or at least the researcher's view of it) and turns them into professional text. Tellingly, he asserts that the means-focused concern of contemporary social research methods with ethical relationships between researcher and researched and the avoidance of value judgements about research subjects results in the researcher hiding their own traces and imprint. Going further, Martyn Hammersley (1999, 2009) argues that a concern with ethics in contemporary research is eclipsing technique and substance.

Boundaries between good and bad research practice thus dissolve and resolve themselves in interesting ways. Contemporary 'good' practice means can become 'bad' from the point of view of

revisitation ends, while the 'bad' practice ends of the past from the view point of the present can be 'good' for revisitation means.

The historical specificity of values around ethical research practice – and the implications for researcher comment on and evaluation of research subjects (or lack of it) – similarly is the case in relation to values concerning childrearing. 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 historical comparative endeavour of assessing assertions about transformations in parenting. We consider this in relation to the issue of parental responsibility in the next section.

6. Parental Responsibility

Mike Savage (2010) argues the assumption that observation was a mode of accessing knowledge pervaded 1960s sociological research, placing the (male) social scientists as intellectual and moral authorities. In the context of the judgmental 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 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 (or otherwise) 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 children's capacities and welfare needs, also highlighted is the contingent and present-centred nature of the categories framing our test focus for the feasibility study. Our original rationale for concentrating on parenting of children in middle childhood was that expert knowledge poses them as in transition between parental dependency and autonomous peer relationships. This assessment does not transfer easily to the 1960s. At that period children of this age and younger seem to have received relatively little supervision, and 'parenting' was not a commonly recognised term. The word 'parent' (more often termed 'mother' or 'father') related to an ascribed relationship rather than as the practice or 'job' it tends to be described now. Many of the families in the classic studies were larger, with some mothers and fathers having upwards of seven children, and older or grown-up children commonly provided considerable domestic and childcare support. 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.

We now turn to changes and continuities in, respectively, the informal and formal support resources that mothers and fathers drew upon in the 1960s and 2000s.

7. Informal and Formal Support

Notwithstanding the very different understandings and expectations associated with being a parent across the two timeframes, we have been able to identify both continuity and change in relation to the informal and formal support accessed by mothers and fathers then and now. Significantly social class remains a constant mediator across generations, profoundly shaping experiences and practices. As was the case in our contemporary study, middle and working class parents were engaged with different priorities and preoccupations.

7.1 Informal support networks

Our focus on informal support was limited somewhat by the class profiles of samples combined with the depth of account in the collections. As we have shown, the two studies from the Townsend collection were largely brief albeit illuminating annotations on surveys concerned with people living in deprived circumstances. Marsden's *ACE Parents and Education* study provides both a varied class profile and more depth of material, but it is focused firmly on choosing children's schools. The two other studies drawn from the Marsden collection, *Mothers Alone* and *Salford*, do provided in-depth

accounts of interactions with family, friends and neighbours but overwhelmingly are concerned with working class life. Overall then, the profile and scope of the collections meant that, while we were able to access a great deal of detail about working class networks, there were far fewer insights into everyday middle class relationships.

From our (re)analysis though, we have been able establish that working class families across both timeframes drew on a similar mix of informal support. In line with our contemporary study, mothers, sisters and friends in the 1960s provided day to day help which included babysitting, passing on clothes and furniture, sharing information, and lending food and money. The types and extent of support received from family members appears to have been no more widespread or intensive than nowadays and seems to have followed a remarkably similar pattern. Many parents received little or no help from their families because of bereavement or illness, geographical distance, or estrangement, while others relied heavily on mothers and or sisters for everyday support.

Unlike the contemporary sample, however, there appeared to be little expectation that family should exist as an unconditional support system. Parents in our own study had expressed a strong ideal of family as providing unqualified support, which rarely matched the reality. Mothers in particular tended to portray other 'normal' families as providing the kind of unreserved support that few parents in our sample actually received (Edwards and Gillies 2004). In the 1960s though, lack of support from family members was not dwelt upon or particularly problematised by parents or the investigators. For example, there is little comment on the fact that one impoverished mother in the *Mothers Alone* research⁹ had very little contact other than a Christmas card exchange with her local and relatively well off brother and sisters. Instead there seems to be some value attached to notions of privacy and independence, particularly within nuclear style households. Another mother, also from the *Mothers Alone* collection, had married a violent, mentally ill drunk, but got no help from her parents until they separated. Marsden records that her father told her that while she was married it was her own affair, commenting 'that's nowt to do with us'. Marsden also appears to express some disapproval about the extent of help this mother subsequently received from them stating that she was:

... too unprotesting, too grateful ... thoroughly expecting at every possible occasion that the family would turn up with some items of clothing.

In the Salford study, Mrs. Pastry (January 1964, SN: 6225) declared with some pride:

My family have never tried to influence me in any way since I got married, my parents' attitude has always been that my life is my affair and I must run it my own way. None of that "come and live near home" attitude.

⁹ Despite our citing of Savage's (2010) and Hammersley's (1999, 2009) various arguments about the way that contemporary concerns with ethical means in research have obscured aspects of researchers, research subjects and research ends, we nonetheless have decided not to attribute quotes at particular points for ethical reasons, to maintain confidentiality at what we deem to be especially sensitive points. We cannot escape that we are social researchers of our time with accompanying and ingrained ethical concerns. Given that actual names are used in the original collections, we felt that identifying names, or even interview numbers that would lead to the names, would break anonymity and – given the public accessibility of this publication – there was a possibility, however remote, that the mothers, their children or wider family might recognise the situation and themselves. In this particular case, the sensitive points concern the extent of wider family support, and comments on it.

She rarely saw her family and a formerly close relationship with her brother ended when he married:

... now we never see him either and I don't suppose we will see much of him again.

Mirroring the contemporary study again, friends and neighbours in the 1960s were a central source of support for parents, with relationships built around a stronger value of reciprocity than was the case for family support. Generally, across the collections, the lending and borrowing of shillings, food and other household items was a regular practice. In the *Katharine Buildings* study, mothers 'knocking up' for each other to go to their cleaning jobs was a daily occurrence. And when more intensive help was needed in the event of illness it was often provided by friends rather than family. For example neighbours of mothers in both the *Katharine Buildings* and *Salford* studies were recorded as helping out in the house when they were in hospital for periods of time. This kind of involvement seemed to incur an open expectation of return. Figure 6, above, reveals that the mother in Room 189 of *Katharine Buildings* borrowed items from friends and they used her washing machine in return. Mrs Campbell from the *Mothers Alone* study articulated this kind of loose expectation of reciprocity quite explicitly as a value

I help people in little ways and I think it comes back a thousandfold ... It's surprising around here how people will help you. They'll come to you and say 'I've got a bit of so and so. I don't know whether you want it'. (Interview No. 014, March 1966, SN: 5072)

She had been given lots of things from friends and neighbours including a three-piece suite, table, wireless, pram and sewing machine, as well as receiving substantial help from her family. This open value around reciprocity was also a notable feature of the working class accounts from the contemporary study, with core networks of highly reciprocal relationships often described in terms of interdependency, obligation and commitment, rather than personal gain (Edwards and Gillies 2004). Mrs Whiteman from the *Mothers Alone* study – a white mother with 'mixed race' children – had very little contact with her family and depended on a tight knit circle of other mothers in similar circumstances for survival (several of whom were present during the interview). Such networks of support continue to be important for contemporary mothers of 'mixed' racial and ethnic children (Caballero and Edwards 2010). Marsden cast Mrs Whiteman and others like her as members of an underclass, partly it seems because of their associations with black men, their 'mixed' children and the reactions of wider society:

It was a curious experience sitting there, in this sub-stratum of life talking about it as though it was everyday life, and on every side their lives were enclosed by some sort of boundary which cut them off from normal working class life ... It was as if the women seemed to be huddling together to protect themselves against a hostile world. (Interview No. 112, July 1965, SN: 5072)

Parallels can be identified with our contemporary study in terms of class differences in the value and meaning of the resources that parents acquired from and provided to their informal social networks. As in the 1960s, working class parents were often embedded in dense and intensive networks of family and friends who provided the practical help and emotional support that enabled reciprocal day-to-day survival. In contrast contemporary middle class parents were more likely to build relationships that preserved and accumulated their relative social advantage through developing social contacts, involving themselves in Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) or standing as a school governor

(Edwards and Gillies 2004). Analysis of the *ACE Parents and Education* material, with its inclusion of higher classification middle class families, points to a comparable instrumental focus of middle class relationships in the context of children's schools, with PTAs similarly forming part of the social lives of better-off parents in the 1960s. For example, one mother became a member of the school board of governors while her youngest child was at primary school:

Well the old district officer left and the new one was asked to recommend somebody to go on the board of governors and she asked me if I'd do it. I happened to know her ... I still had a child at the school at the time and I thought it might help. (Interview No. 92195, July 1961, SN: 6224).

Another said that she and her husband belonged to a 'Guild' at their son's selective secondary school that held whist drives and dinner dances for the parents and teachers to get to know each other (Interview No. 51955, June 1961, SN: 6224), while a father said of the private school that his younger two children attended:

... we're always down there. It's sort of a social thing down there. We go down for speech days and sports days. There's always something going on. (Interview No. 70607, July 1961, SN: 6225)

Reputations about schools were clearly circulated by such parents who discussed, gave and took advice based on the local education mores in their circles. Marsden notes that one father, in his search for information about grammar schools, amongst others, consulted two PhDs and technicians from deHavillands (aircraft builders) (Interview No. 62355, June 1961, SN: 6224), while a mother remarked of one school:

Most of the people we talked to about it said that it was a bad school. (Interview No. 51955, June 1961, SN: 6224).

For lower classification working class parents, it appeared that support networks were preoccupied with functions other than providing information about education. Even in a study focusing specifically on choosing secondary schools, there are indications that the concerns of a father and mother living in a pit village had been dealing with cramped living conditions, and themselves providing support to the wife's ailing mother and mentally ill brother, with little time for pursuing information about education among the strong local networks they were embedded in, should they have been able to provide such information (Interview No. 80175, June 1961, SN: 6224). And we have already noted the reciprocal daily survival tactics of 'knocking up', 'passing on' and borrowing that characterised accounts in the *Katharine Buildings* and *Salford* studies.

Working class mothers across the timeframes described dense networks of highly reciprocal supportive relationships, but those from the contemporary study were much more likely to describe these in terms of emotional bonds than those from the 1960s. Mothers taking part in our own research saw friendship as highly meaningful and valuable in its own right and had a strong sense of emotional support as a distinct need (Edwards and Gillies 2005). For example, Denise, a white working class mother from the contemporary study said of the supportive bond she had with her long-standing female friend:

I love her to bits. She's the one I go to. I mean she knows things about me that even me husband don't know. And same way round. We've got that relationship.

The 1960s mothers were distinctly less sentimental about friendships and there was no real conception of emotional support as defined need. Nevertheless, mothers and especially fathers appeared to have a more active social life 50 years ago. Looking at the material from the *Salford* and *Katharine Buildings* studies in particular, it appears to have been common for both parents to go out to the local pub of an evening, popping back occasionally to check on the children who had been left alone – another practice that would bring opprobrium and sanction nowadays. Bingo was a staple entertainment for 1960s working class mothers, while fathers frequently met up with friends and family in pubs. Fathers taking part in the contemporary study were considerably less sociable with a significant number describing themselves as having few friends of their own beyond work acquaintances and their partners' friends (Edwards and Gillies 2004). Reflecting the different expectations and requirement around providing childcare the contemporary parents were much less likely to have regular nights out together.

A continuity is apparent however, in the way that distinctions between family, friends and neighbours could be blurred in both timeframes. Enduring friends could come to be seen as family. In the *Salford* study, a family on the estate had an 'adoptive' uncle living with them, described by Dennis Marsden as a 'homosexual pantomime dame'.¹⁰ The same family also cared for an 'adoptive nephew' with special needs, while an elderly neighbour was generally known by those in the block of flats where they lived as 'Auntie May'. In the contemporary study, close female friends were the most likely to become reclassified as family and likened to sisters (Gillies and Edwards 2006b).

The distinction between neighbours and friends seems to have had greater significance in the 1960s, however. Just as the term parent has subsequently become a verb, the word neighbour appears to have denoted a more active practice than might be recognised today. Many references are made in the 1960s studies to 'neighbouring' and this is not always viewed as a positive activity. For example, Mrs. Henry from the *Mothers Alone* study stated:

I've never neighboured. My mother never did, and I were brought up the same way. Well, up here they don't bother anyway. You could be dead in the house and they wouldn't worry about you. Except the young women next door. She'd live with you if she could. But I'm not one of those that wants people sitting in their house. I don't mind if there's something wrong, helping people, but I'm frightened to go out and hang up the washing in our back garden in case she collars me. (Interview No. 053, May 1965, SN: 5072)

Mrs. Henry's quote reflects some of the tensions around the notion of 'neighbouring' in the 1960s, particularly in terms of balancing intrusion and imposition with social responsibility.¹¹ Similar issues were raised in the *Salford* and *Katharine Buildings* studies, with some families explicitly distancing themselves from the practice while others decried a perceived loss of sociability and solidarity. In general, the term neighbour seemed to evoke a greater sense of obligation in the 1960s, and according to Dennis Marsden 'neighbouring' may have been viewed as a 'lower class' activity'

¹⁰ Another instance where our contemporary ethical sensibilities mean we prefer not to identify the source.

¹¹ Thanks to Simon Duncan for pointing us towards Gorer's (1955) discussion of intrusion and distrust in relation to neighbouring.

Nevertheless, neighbours provided considerable support, as was also the case for the contemporary sample. Across both timeframes neighbours featured strongly as providers of informal support, and could in some cases come to be regarded first and foremost as friends.

7.2 Formal support services

The framework of statutory and voluntary services designed for families has changed considerably since the 1960s. Nonetheless, constants have remained in the kinds of formal support accessed. Then as now, advice and help was primarily sought from health and education professionals. In the 1960s General Practitioners (GPs) appeared to have a particularly weighty role and high standing. All of those in the *Mothers Alone* sub-sample discussed visiting their surgery for help and advice. Doctors doled out pills for 'nerves' and depression, gave advice on birth control and diets, but also provided more personal advice on family matters. For example, one mother's¹² doctor arranged for her to be sterilised to stop her husband from getting her pregnant again and later wrote a note to her solicitor to chase up the divorce proceedings. Several of the mothers had been advised by their GPs to leave their husbands. The often paternalistic guidance mothers received from doctors appears to have been imbued with a particular power and status and was rarely questioned. In the *Mothers Alone* sub-sample, two mothers admitted avoiding their GPs in case they were told to stop their paid work, while Mrs. Pastry from the *Salford* study planned to move home on the advice of her doctor (January 1964, SN: 6225).

The extremely high levels of mental illness reported in the *Mothers Alone* and the *Salford* studies, as well as much evidence of this in the *Poverty in the UK* research too, may be an important contextualising factor here. A considerable number of mothers in the sample were on medication for 'nerves' and therefore were to some extent dependant on their doctors. Significant numbers had also been hospitalised after having mental breakdowns, while many of the absent fathers in the *Mothers Alone* study as well as resident fathers in the *Poverty in the UK* study had received psychiatric intervention. In contrast, the mental health of children was remarked upon much less often, aside from identifying some children as 'retarded'. This seems to mark a substantial shift away from concerns about the psychological stability of parents towards a more contemporary preoccupation with the behaviour and development of children (a shift in topics that was reflected in our contemporary interview schedule).

GPs featured much less often in the accounts from parents in the contemporary study, with the kinds of advice sought from them limited to specific health conditions and concerns. Contemporary parents were also likely to turn to a wider range of sources for medical advice relating to the health of their children including the internet, complementary therapists and private specialists. Contemporary parents also were much more likely to contest advice dispensed by doctors and recount experiences of medical professionals getting it wrong or overlooking problems. Where medical advice was sought specifically in relation to behaviour or development, problems tended to be framed in terms of disorders such as dyslexia or ADHD. In this case a doctor's remit could be viewed as relatively narrow. For example, Paula from our contemporary study visited the doctor about her young daughter's hyperactive behaviour and poor sleeping patterns, but felt medication was all he could really offer. His advice to lock the child in her bedroom at night was immediately dismissed by Paula (although she decided to use a stair-gate to block her in instead). In contrast to the 1960s parents,

¹² A further instance where we have decided not to identify the source.

those from the contemporary study were likely to draw boundaries between medical concerns and parenting issues. For example, Julie, a working class mother, relied on hospital doctors to treat her daughter's hormone problem, but did not want their involvement in addressing the child's weight problem, which she accepted as a personal responsibility. Like Julie, other parents in the contemporary sample identified parenting issues as distinct from health or education concerns, viewing professional involvement in the area in terms of intrusion.

The more bounded approach characterising contemporary parents' interpretations of a doctor's remit also seems to highlight different understandings of family privacy and autonomy across the timeframes. Working class parents in the 1960s appear to have been more compliant and to have accepted a greater level of intrusion in their home by visiting professionals. This is evident in Dennis Marsden's descriptions, particularly in the *Mothers Alone* dataset, which suggest that he had inspected every room in each household. He reflects that the mothers sometimes seemed embarrassed and flustered when he entered certain rooms, but there was no suggestion that they would (or ever did) refuse him access. This kind of research practice today would be considered highly unethical, perhaps reflecting the greater store that is set by values around privacy as well as consent. As well as resonating with Mike Savage's (2010) point, noted earlier, that there was a lack of clarity in researcher—researched relationships and how they were to treat each other at the time, it seems equally the case that poor mothers in the 1960s, particularly those drawing National Assistance¹³, would have been viewed (and viewed themselves) as subject to state scrutiny in the broader context of means testing. For example, the following excerpt appears in Mrs Whiteman's interview detailing a visit from a National Assistance Board (NAB) official:

“Then he came in, and all of a sudden he walked across and the children were in the kitchen, and the door was closed, and we wondered wherever he was going and he opened the door and went right through and caught Stephen's father in the pantry. But you hear of them going all over the place, they look under the beds and they look in the wardrobes and they never ask to come in”. All three women could produce instances of this. (Interview No. 112, July 1965, SN: 5072)

The NAB provided crucial financial support, but as Marsden noted in *Mothers Alone*, encounters were commonly characterised by resentment.¹⁴ There was considerable variability between the amounts of aid received, the system was complex and difficult to navigate and the mothers described hostile encounters with officials. Mothers often seem to have sought advice from other agencies to help them in their dealings with the NAB. Mrs Seaton had relied on her probation officer to argue her case when her benefit was reduced, while Mrs Henry had visited the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) to find out if she might be entitled to any extra money at Christmas. The CAB also seems to have been a first stop for mothers thinking of leaving their husbands. In Huddersfield the organisation was headed by a prominent local figure, Mrs Middleton Haig, who is mentioned by two of the mothers in our *Mothers Alone* sub-sample. There is little sense that the mothers found the CAB particularly useful, however, with some experiencing Middleton Haig as domineering, rude and somewhat eccentric.

¹³ National Assistance was the state means-tested benefit that maintained people who had no other source of income at a low subsistence level, taking into account people's different basic needs. Unlike today's Income Support, which serves the same sort of function, National Assistance Board officers who assessed people's needs had considerable discretionary powers, and inconsistent and harsh decisions were said to be commonplace (Hill 1969).

¹⁴ Indeed, criticism of the treatment meted out by National Assistance Board officers to lone mothers was a feature of Marsden's report on his research, and resulted in officials holding up its publication.

One mother recounted how in relation to her violent husband she had been advised to 'go and kiss him you silly bugger'.

Working class parents from the contemporary study also discussed visiting the CAB and other organisations for advice on their rights. However, this kind of support was more often accessed in relation to disputes with their children's schools, perhaps reflecting the extent to which education has become a more fraught and contentious area for parents. In the 1960s, support for parents in relation to their children's school could be accessed through the Local Authority Education Office which provided advice and financial support for uniforms and school trips. The kind of help sought from the Education Office was inevitably highly classed with the most disadvantaged parents relying on grants for shoes and coats. Analysis of the *ACE Parents and Education* material suggests middle class parents were more likely to seek out information, while the working classes characteristically took advice. For example, Marsden recorded a working class mother saying

"... if he [son] wants to go on to college, I don't know what'll happen to him. Oh we do hope he goes on. Do you know anything about grants for college?"

And later remarked in his fieldnotes:

[Parents] placing great value in education. Holding opinions on many topics, but deferential and openly willing to modify them, welcoming advice.

In contrast, a middle class mother recounted:

"Yes well we have got the school all fixed up now, we are thinking of moving in a short while over the Burgess Hill. I did go to a school there but I didn't like the look of that ... we had sent in to Lewes to the education officer for a list of schools and we went round to see this other one and I liked that much better."

More generally, parents in the 1960s appear to have experienced little of the dissatisfaction around education that infused contemporary accounts. Indeed, it is evident that the middle class parents in our sub-sample who sent their children to private school did this not only or so much to prioritise their educational attainment, but equally or more to avoid their children picking up bad habits such as speaking with a local working class accent, or behaving in a rowdy fashion. For example, one mother, whose youngest child was at private school, asserted:

... there wasn't many good schools about, and we had the money so we thought we would send her, we was paying for lessons you see she'd taken elocution lessons and a bit of acting and we didn't want her to be held back, we would have been wasting money really giving her elocution lessons, the way some of the kids talked round here, so we thought we would send her to a convent school, and they teach them manners there and I think manners is very important for a girl ... [sic from notes, Interview No. X0623, August 1961, SN: 6224)

And yet, it is also clear that parents who did not use the state education system could feel themselves placed in a morally dubious position, acknowledging that a 'social mix' was important and advantageous in some way and that their children would be less likely to experience it in a private

school. One father whose younger children were at private schools seemed to offset this with the fact that there was a 'mix' of people locally (though it seems to be a particular sort of mix):

You get a cross-section of the whole population around here. You get all sorts. Lots of army and navy people. Methodist ministers. Local farmers' children. (Interview No. 70607, July 1961, SN: 6224)

A mother whose son was at a selective school remarked that she felt a bit guilty about not finding a private school for him, but her husband felt that their son would need to 'mix' at some time (Interview No. 51955, June 1961, SN: 6224). There thus seems to have been some tension between maintaining social and cultural status through accent and behaviour, and giving children the benefit of a wide social mix. This may be linked to the emphasis on ensuring a mixing of social classes as beneficial in the planning of policy and development around that time (e.g. Orlan 1952).¹⁵

In terms of formal support needs another significant difference between then and now concerns the extent to which 1960s lone mothers appeared to rely on the care system to tide them over challenging times. While having a child taken into care today carries considerable stigma, it appears to have been a more commonplace, acceptable practice in the 1960s. (There have of course been several swings in social work practice in this respect over the past half century.) Many of those participating in the *Mothers Alone* study had children admitted to care homes, while others struggled to get the welfare office to accept them. In our sub-sample, the children of two mothers had spent time in children's homes and another mother had unsuccessfully applied twice to get hers taken into care after her husband died.¹⁶ Children's homes are discussed as a useful resource rather than a last resort, offering a temporary break in difficult circumstances. Children often seem to have gone into homes when their mothers were ill. While friends and family sometimes took on children in these circumstances, help was limited by the poverty that seems to have defined the lone mothers' social networks. Caring and providing for extra children could place an untenable burden on already stretched household resources, particularly since there were often several to be placed.

Residential care did not feature in the same way in the other studies presumably because fathers were generally present. In times of need, both the *Salford* and the *Katharine Buildings* studies indicate that female friends and relatives came in to the family home to help out the father. For the lone mothers, care homes seem to have been viewed as a necessary and valuable support and efforts were commonly focused around persuading the authorities to accept or keep children. For example, one mother in the *Mothers Alone* study had been hospitalised for a period with an acute, dangerous infection, and had complained that her children were sent back to her on her discharge even though she was still very sick:

I went down there and I cried, I begged and prayed them to take them but they say 'they're your children, and you've got to bide by that'.¹⁷

¹⁵ Our thanks to Dave Byrne and Ray Pahl for bringing this potential link to our attention.

¹⁶ Another topic where we feel that the anonymity of all those involved should be protected in the context of the contemporary stigma.

¹⁷ See footnote 16.

Another mother from the *Mothers Alone* sub-sample was more concerned to avoid her children being taken in to care when the NSPCC became involved as a result of her husband's cruelty, but even she emphasised how well provided for they would have been:

Oh, to think of children in one of them homes. Although they are very nice, I'm always meeting someone and she said, 'Don't be sorry for them, they've got seven pairs of different sorts of shoes, and they have two holidays a year, and at Christmas-time they are going for this trip, and that trip. They have a lot more than what ours have'.¹⁸

None of the parents from the contemporary study ever had cause to rely on the residential care system. The lone mothers in our contemporary sample had no more than two children each and were able to access sufficient resources from friends and family to allow them cope on a daily basis.

8. Conclusion – Feasibility and Findings

In this Working Paper we have been concerned with both the methodology and substance of an historical comparison of experiences of family and parenting practices, in a context where grand statements often are made that contemporary family relationships and parental support systems form a radical break with the past.

Methodologically, a key impetus for our study was to explore the feasibility of comparing practices and meanings across qualitative data sources and across timeframes, bringing material from several archived classic in-depth family and community studies conducted in the 1960s into dialogue with each other, and with findings from a recent study of resources in parenting. Our confidence that this historical comparative methodology (which seems to cause concern for social science research funders and referees) is possible is rooted in the fact that it is a common process for historians and for comparative social policy researchers, and in our experience of its potential and illuminations in the small-scale project we have described in this Working Paper.

As part of our historical comparative methodological process we engaged with ideas about descriptive assemblage. As we worked with observational fieldnotes and reconstructed quotes from the archived Marsden and Townsend collections, we developed a methodological framework that identifies key issues in understanding the context of historical comparative production. We developed the concepts of 'investigative biography' as referring to the knowledge production process, and of 'empirical moments' as political, social and cultural issues in play, both as applicable and relevant to the original researchers and their research (historical) and ourselves as researchers and our study (contemporary). Within this descriptive methodological framework then, the contexts of researcher, research and wider society are placed as integral to an historical comparative approach and as primary data rather than added-on.

Working with this descriptive methodological framework led us also to consider the ways that historical comparative work of the type we undertook calls into question several conventional assumptions about research boundaries. Distinctions between what are categorised as quantitative or qualitative datasets start to crumble, as do ideas about what counts as qualitative 'interview' data.

¹⁸ See footnote 16.

Researchers morph into research participants. A shift to 'good' ethical research practice becomes 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 over the four decades of our historical comparative study.

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. 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.

Further, historical and contemporary working class mothers and fathers drew on a similar mix of day-to-day informal support from family members, friends and neighbours. Yet expectations about unqualified familial support appear to be far higher today than they were in the 1960s, as opposed to more constant, similar ideas about reciprocity between friends across the period. Nonetheless, working class parents were and are embedded in reciprocal dense networks of family and friends providing daily material and social support – albeit that emotional bonds receive more emphasis in contemporary accounts and 'neighbouring' was perceived as a distinct practice in the 1960s. In contrast, middle class mothers and fathers were and are often instrumentally concerned with building social contacts that will bring social advantage. Indeed, our historical comparative work identifies the way that social class has remained a mediator, shaping family experiences and parenting practices.

Accessing formal support systems, especially health and education professionals, is another constant across the four decades. But while mothers and fathers in the 1960s seem to have accorded a great deal of weight to the professional advice and instructions that they received, and to the people dispensing them, about all aspects of their family lives and parenting, and were prepared to contemplate placing their children in temporary care if necessary, contemporary parents were more likely to contest professional advice, to take a more bounded approach to intrusive interventions into their parenting, and to seek other sources of advice as well. Middle class parents' concerns with education as a practice providing social and cultural distinction for their children are also constant across the four decades. While education provision is more subject to worries and dissatisfaction for contemporary middle class mothers and fathers, however, in the 1960s their consciences could prick over whether or not their children were experiencing a broad social mix as part of their schooling.

The findings we have discussed in this Working Paper are based on a small exploratory study, but they highlight the potential value of revisiting of past family relationships and resources to better understand current experiences. Indeed, overall there are important messages here about the ahistorical assumptions embedded in policy debates and wider concerns about contemporary parenting deficits and fractured support systems.

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