

Families remembering food: reusing secondary data

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Abstract:

This paper examines the reuse of secondary data from three oral history archives in a current project on 'Families Remembering Food'. The characteristics of the three archives (The Edwardians, 100 Families and the Millennium Memory Bank) are outlined paying particular attention to how, when and why the original data were collected. The challenges and opportunities of reusing these data are explored under three headings: practicalities, epistemologies and ethics. The paper concludes that the three archives have rich potential for reuse provided that they are adequately (re)contextualised and that the dialogical nature of life history research is sufficiently understood. The paper contributes to recent debates about the reflexive nature of qualitative analysis in general and the reuse of secondary data in particular.

Keywords:

Oral history, reuse of secondary data, families and food, reflexivity

Introduction

This paper considers the challenges involved in reusing secondary data in the context of a current research project examining the relationship between families and food. The project is entitled ‘Families Remembering Food’ and is funded as part of the ‘Changing Families, Changing Food’ research programme.¹ Specifically, the paper examines the benefits and potential pitfalls of reusing life history material from three archival sources: ‘The Edwardians’, ‘100 Families’ and the Millennium Memory Bank. Acknowledging recent debates in this journal and elsewhere, we present our analysis of the challenges and opportunities of reusing this material under three headings: practicalities, epistemologies and ethics. We conclude that these sources have rich potential for reuse provided that the original material is properly (re)contextualised and that the dialogical and reflexive nature of life history research is adequately understood.

Reusing secondary data

The secondary analysis of existing datasets is becoming more widespread and is actively encouraged by funding sources such as the ESRC.² This is increasingly true of qualitative as well as quantitative datasets, with textbooks on reworking qualitative data now available (e.g. Heaton 2004) and with an increasing number of studies advocating reuse or actively employing such methods (e.g. Corti et al. 2005; Fielding & Fielding 2000; Savage 2005). The novelty of reuse within sociological research has been disputed with authors such as Silva (2007: 1.2) noting that reusing data is quite routine among social scientists as well as being the very basis of other disciplines such as history.³ In advocating the potential for reuse, much emphasis has been placed on the need for sufficient background information in order to (re)contextualise the original data. In a key paper, published in this journal, Mauthner et al. (1998) argue that such an approach places too much emphasis on practical questions rather than acknowledging the fundamental epistemological issues involved in reusing qualitative data, working within a reflexive and interpretative paradigm. Revisiting their own data, Mauthner et al. insist that researchers play a fundamental role not just in interpreting and theorising the data but also in the process of data construction. Without acknowledging these epistemological issues, they argue, researchers will fall back, perhaps unwittingly, into a ‘naively realist’ position. In a later paper, Mauthner and Doucet (2003) underline the difficulties of not just *being*

reflexive but of *doing* reflexive research. We share their interest in the practical and ethical issues of undertaking reflexive research and in addressing the fundamental epistemological questions raised in the reuse of secondary data.

While some have argued that the analysis of secondary data raises distinctive issues when compared with primary data analysis, others have argued that the distinction can be overdrawn and that ‘context is critical’ in the analysis of both primary and secondary data (Bishop 2005). Current debates about reuse focus on the need to ‘recontextualise’ data (Bishop 2006; Moore 2007), through both considering the original context in which the data were collected *and* the current context of reuse. This is a key question which we address in varying ways in each of the following analytical sections. Briefly, though, ‘recontextualisation’ may involve attending to the prevailing historical conditions and political climate at the time of the original study (which may have shaped the questions asked and the answers given); it may involve the shifting meaning of key terms (like ‘convenience’ and ‘choice’ in the context of food research); and it may involve the need to recontextualise answers to one question in terms of responses given to other questions elsewhere in the interview. In each case, we argue, a dialogical process is at work, where the past is always seen through the lens of the present; where answers to one question are shaped by answers to other questions; where one family member may be reacting to attitudes and opinions held by other family members from the same or another generation; and where there is a complex interplay between the interviewer, the interviewee and subsequent researchers.⁴ We expand on these ideas in the section on epistemologies (below).

Families Remembering Food

‘Families Remembering Food’ is an oral history project which attempts to document changes in the constitution of family life since the early 20th century and to assess their relationship to changing patterns of food consumption. The project is based on the reuse of qualitative data from existing archival material and focuses particularly on inter-generational differences in attitudes to family, health and food across the UK. The project addresses four specific research questions:

- What is the place of food in people’s memories of family life?

- How have social constructions of ‘the family’ and memories of family life changed over time?
- How do gender, ethnicity and social class impact on the different inter-connections between family and food?
- What methodological considerations do researchers face when reusing oral history archives?

The present paper concentrates particularly on this final question although some substantive issues relating to the other questions will also be addressed.

Once considered marginal, oral history methods are now well established within the humanities and social sciences (Thompson 1978; Perks & Thomson 2006). Life history interviewing is a key component of the oral historian’s craft and consists of recording a person’s memories in a more-or-less chronological account from their earliest childhood experiences to the present day. The testimony that results is of interest not so much in terms of its historical accuracy -- although life history methods often record accounts from those whose lives might otherwise be ‘hidden from history’ (Rowbotham 1973) -- but in terms of what it reveals about the subjectivity of the person whose history is being recorded. Notions of myth and memory are therefore central to the method (Samuel & Thompson 1982). The reuse of life history archives has been widely practiced and energetically debated (see, for example, Elliot 2001; Bornat 2003; and the special issue of *Sociological Research Online* 2007). In what follows, we draw on the evidence of our current research to argue that the reuse of life history material raises challenges in terms of practicalities, epistemologies and ethics.

Sources

Our research draws on three archival sources: The Edwardians, 100 Families, and the Millennium Memory Bank. These sources were chosen because of their intrinsic quality and interest and in order to provide access to popular memories of family life stretching back from the present day to the beginning of the 20th century. One of the authors (Graham Smith) was a researcher on ‘100 Families’ and helped in the research design of the Millennium Memory Bank collection. We also interviewed

Paul Thompson as part of our current project, probing the circumstances of his original research and subsequent interpretation. While this gave us privileged information in some respects, we reject any suggestion that only those involved in initial data collection can understand the context sufficiently to interpret the data. Rather, we would agree with Mason (2007: 3.3) that such claims are ‘anti-historical’, place too much epistemological weight on ‘successful reflexivity’, and rely too much on the memory of individual researchers.

The Edwardians:

The Edwardians is an archive of 444 life history interviews providing information about family life and work experience among British people born between 1870 and 1908, stratified by region and social class. The collection was assembled by Paul Thompson at the University of Essex and the archive is administered by ESDS Qualidata (see: <http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/online/data/edwardians/introduction.asp>). The interviews were undertaken in the early 1970s. Paul Thompson has written extensively from the archive (Thompson 1975, 1978) and the collection is one of the most frequently reused oral history sources, facilitated by Qualidata’s investment in the ‘Edwardians Online’.⁵ A number of different people undertook the original interviews, which were open-ended but followed a detailed schedule covering parents and childhood, schooling and employment, politics and religion, social class and marriage. The interviews lasted between one and six hours. They were recorded on reel-to-reel tapes and transcribed in full. The interview transcripts are now available as PDF files from ESDS. The original recordings are deposited at the British Library Sound Archive.

100 Families:

Paul Thompson was also responsible for the creation of our second archive whose official title is ‘Families, Social Mobility and Ageing: an Intergenerational Approach, 1900-1988’ (more commonly known as ‘100 Families’). The interviews were carried out between 1985 and 1988, using a team of trained interviewers, working to a common interview schedule covering childhood and family background, occupation and working life, marriage and child-rearing. The focus was somewhat more specific than in the case of The Edwardians as the study was intended to complement the

ESRC-funded ‘stagflation’ project.⁶ This required close attention to questions of research design with the target of 100 families carefully selected through cluster sampling from across the electoral wards of England, Wales and Scotland. The sample was designed to allow comparison across two, and in some cases three, generations of the same families, initially targeting the ‘middle’ generation of 30-55 year olds, married with children, the subsequent aim being to interview members of the older and younger generations. Over 200 interviews were eventually collected. Transcripts are available electronically in Word format and the original tapes are deposited with the University of Essex (see: <http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/online/data/100fams/introduction.asp>).

The Millennium Memory Bank:

The Millennium Memory Bank (MMB) is one of the largest oral history collections ever to have been assembled. It was designed as a ‘snapshot’ of Britain at the turn of the 21st century (Perks 2001). The digital collection was compiled by a consortium of 40 local BBC radio stations, coordinated by the British Library Sound Archive (see: <http://www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive/millenni.html>). Some 6000 people of all ages and backgrounds were asked to record their memories and experiences under sixteen different headings covering ‘where we live’, ‘house and home’, ‘living together’, ‘who we are’, ‘belonging’, ‘crime and the law’, ‘growing up’, ‘getting older’, ‘technology’, ‘eating and drinking’, ‘money’, ‘playtime’, ‘going places’, ‘life and death’, ‘belief and fears’ and ‘what’s next’. Despite the time spent in choosing topics that were believed to be ‘familiar to us all, but as oral history... rare’ (Purcell 1998), the fact that the recordings were made by people with little training in oral history and with the needs of local radio primarily in mind means that the MMB is very diverse in quality and coverage.

We turn now to the questions that arose in attempting to reuse these archival sources in our current research on family and food. We focus here on broadly methodological questions but it is worth emphasising that the data were valuable in addressing a number of substantive questions, allowing us to challenge present-day myths (about the decline of the ‘family meal’, for example); to examine changing gender roles and domestic routines (regarding men’s involvement in cooking and cleaning, for example); and to question the nature of inter-generational transmission (regarding

constructions of motherhood and relationships between fathers and sons, for example).⁷ For present purposes, however, the discussion is organised under three headings: practicalities, epistemologies, and ethics.

Practicalities

All three collections contain more information about family life than about food. This poses an initial practical limitation on our reuse of the data. Had we been conducting the interviews ourselves, it would clearly have been easier to solicit data on topics that were of direct interest to our research rather than relying on the questions that were asked by the original interviewers whose research was driven by very different questions from our own. This is particularly frustrating in cases where an issue of relevance to our research arose but where there was no follow-on question. In one of the Edwardian interviews (Interview 142), for example, the question of where the domestic staff ate was asked but no information was requested about what they ate. Where follow-on questions were asked they tended to pursue additional factual information rather than inviting interviewees to reflect on their attitudes, feelings and emotions such as we might ourselves have done.

A second practical question concerns the degree of 'fit' between the primary data and the questions that drive the secondary reuse of those data (cf. Hinds et al. 1997). This point is well made by Rosemary Elliot (2001) who used the '100 Families' archive to assess attitudes to smoking during the 1980s. Elliot notes that of the 200 interviews she examined, 126 discussed smoking. The inference she draws from this is that, while it was not a key question for most of the interviewers, the issue was a current one for many of the interviewees. Elliot is therefore satisfied that the archive can be used to provide an assessment of lay perceptions of smoking and health at the time in question.

The Edwardian interviews contain a wealth of material that is relevant to the 'Families Remembering Food' project. There is detailed information about meal times (what is eaten, where, when and who prepared it), food sourcing (homemade, shop-bought, livestock etc), table manners, infant feeding practices and gender roles. There are also rich data on family life including parents' backgrounds, the number and spacing of siblings, extended family members, sleeping arrangements, family

discipline, activities inside and outside the home, religious practices and beliefs, political attitudes, parents' involvement in their children's schooling, marriage and family relationships. Memories of food and family intersect at several points in the interviews, particularly in relation to people's work-life and domestic routines and on ritual occasions such as Christmas and birthdays.

As with *The Edwardians*, questions pertaining to food were only a small part of the '100 Families' project but there were many instances where food-related issues arose. The collection contains detailed information on meal times and food shopping, for example, which can be contextualised in terms of other information about working hours, social class and gender relations. In general, the '100 Families' interviews are shorter than with *The Edwardians*. A subject like meal times which might have filled five or six transcript pages in *The Edwardians* typically only occupies one page in '100 Families'. But the unique design of the '100 Families' sample means that multiple narratives regarding food and family are available from different members of the same family. This provides an opportunity for a specific kind of 'triangulation', designed not to confirm the accuracy of one person's memory through corroboration with another person's account but to ascertain how the same event is recounted by different members of the same family. So, for example, the juxtaposition of views from mother (Margaret) and daughter (Samantha) in Interviews 60 and 61 (*The Hallums*) provides a degree of consensus about family meal times but also some interesting divergence of views about domestic responsibilities. Margaret paints a picture of domestic harmony where the entire family sat around the table together, where good table manners prevailed and where everyone could have 'a good chin wag':

Interviewer: Could you describe mealtimes to me. When you have the main meal of the day?

Margaret: Our main meal during the week is at teatime, six o'clock. At the weekend, if I am here, then we have our main meal at dinnertime. If I am not here we will have it at night-time. [Describes typical meal.]

Interviewer: Do you have breakfast together?

Margaret: Yes. We do. Unless Jeff [her husband] is going out early, he is going to London. But normally we always have breakfast together and we always

have our main meal together if we possibly can. Lunchtime is usually a snack of some sort, a sandwich or if they are here on Saturday and the children are on their own they make just beef burgers or hotdogs. That is really a light snacky sort of meal during the day, so really it is the morning and the evening that are our basic meals.

Interviewer: Are meals quite formal? Do you talk a lot?

Margaret: Yes. We do talk a lot. That is really the times we all talk. We all get together, so we have a good chinwag.

Interviewer: Do the children have to ask to leave the table?

Margaret: Yes.

By contrast, Margaret's daughter Samantha describes meal times as a rather less consensual occasion when the children wanted to watch television and their mother disapproved; where the mother 'goes on about' table manners and insisted that the children asked permission to leave the table; and where arguments occurred, drawing in the father on the side of his daughters:

Interviewer: Can you think back when you were younger when you were living in Enfield. When did you or do you have the main meal of the day?

Samantha: In the evening.

Interviewer: Is that with your mum and dad and three children?

Samantha: All of us together.

Interviewer: Are they quite formal occasions?

Samantha: We do talk. Mum does not like us to watch television, but we do.

Interviewer: Does that mean you don't always have dinner at the table?

Samantha: Yes we do, because we have got the television here. We do eat round the table and mum goes on about manners. We have to ask to get down from the table.

Interviewer: You do? So do you all do that?

Samantha: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you have arguments about that?

Samantha: Yes. Especially when dad gets up - we say "dad did not ask, you obviously have not trained him properly".

A similar example occurred later in the same pair of interviews where Margaret claims that she does most of the housework but where Samantha insists that she sometimes cooks dinner, particularly at the weekends when her mother worked outside the home. Moreover, while Margaret refers to 'the children' without

differentiating between her two teenage daughters, Samantha makes a clear distinction between her own domestic duties and her sister Andrea who she claims never cooks. This juxtaposition of views is extremely useful in drawing out generational differences in recollection (between parents and children) and within the same generation (between sisters). Similar inter-generational comparisons are not possible with the other archives and represent a uniquely valuable feature of '100 Families'.

The Millennium Memory Bank contains a range of information about food but is much less systematic and of more variable quality than either of the other archives. 'Eating and drinking' is one of the sixteen themes on which information was sought, designed to chart changing attitudes to food and drink, nutrition and diet, and a diverse range of other subjects including attitudes to ethnic restaurants, nouvelle cuisine and convenience foods.

Approaching the sources as we did with new research questions in mind clearly has its dangers. It is tempting, for example, to try and extract relevant material from each interview without paying sufficient attention to the wider narrative context in which the extract is embedded. Crudely, then, one might search the transcripts for references to food and drink without paying attention to comments elsewhere in the interview that shed light on these specific references. The strength of a life history approach, as opposed to more structured or subject-specific interviews, is that particular issues (such as food) can be located in a wider biographical and social context (including the dynamics of family life). This is a possible limitation in Rosemary Elliot's (2001) previously-referenced use of the '100 Families' archive to study contemporary attitudes to smoking. Noting that her analysis was done from the transcripts rather than from the original recordings, she adds that she searched the data specifically looking for material on smoking and health. While she was able to reach interesting conclusions about smoking as an expression of autonomy and independence, about the prevalence of smoking in particular work environments (such as the army) and about the extent of gender differences in smoking (with mothers particularly deploring smoking among their daughters), the restriction of the material extracted to smoking-related themes limits the wider contextualisation of the data.

As a final practical question, it is worth reflecting on the technical issues that arose in reusing the different archives and the time commitments this implied in each case. The full transcripts of the Edwardian interviews, together with copies of the handwritten field notes and associated correspondence, are available to download from the Qualidata website. The wealth of supporting material is undoubtedly helpful in (re)contextualising the interview data. But the files are in read-only PDF format which meant that the researcher (Sarah Olive) could not easily cut and paste the transcripts into our chosen software package (NVivo) for subsequent analysis. The ‘100 Families’ interviews were available to download as Word files which avoided this problem, while the MMB archive has only interview summaries rather than full transcripts. The volume of data also presents challenges even on a relatively well-resourced project such as ours (where a full-time researcher was employed for 21 months). In the event, the researcher worked through *The Edwardians* by reading in full over 200 of the original transcripts and then sampling one in ten of the remaining interviews.

Reusing the ‘100 Families’ collection presented different practical challenges. The transcripts were available from Qualidata as Word documents that were easier to transfer into NVivo than was the case with *The Edwardians*. The transcripts were also easier to read than the typewritten and scanned Edwardian transcripts. While there were fewer appendices than with *The Edwardians* (interviewers’ field notes etc), the interviewer’s biographical details are included (name, region, date of birth, occupation, class, gender, marital status) and, sometimes, the date of the interview. These are all valuable data in (re)contextualising the original interview material. In practice, we read each of the transcripts, looking particularly for mentions of food and family and then returning to the full transcript in order to place the particular extract within the wider context of the life history from which it was drawn.

In the case of the MMB, the key challenge was the sheer volume and diversity of the data. The archive contains interview summaries (but not transcripts) of all 6000 interviews, plus recordings of all of the radio programmes that were broadcast at the time.⁸ The collection is searchable via the Sound Archive’s online catalogue but access to the original recordings requires a prior appointment at The British Library when only a small number of recordings can be accessed on each visit.⁹ The content

and presentation of the interview summaries is also very diverse. Some include verbatim ‘highlights’ from the interviews while others are descriptive accounts (written in the third person). Most are in English, some in Welsh. All have the interviewee’s name, date of birth, sex, occupation and catalogue number and some have track numbers or other notation to indicate where in an interview a particular passage occurs. These formatting issues and inconsistencies posed particular challenges in reusing this material. In practice, we worked through 1000 of the interview summaries but analysed in detail a much smaller sample (approximately 126), using only those summaries that were in English and which included key words or phrases such as ‘food’ and ‘eating’.

Epistemologies

In this section we aim to extend Jennifer Mason’s (2007) recent call for qualitative researchers to employ an ‘investigative epistemology’ in the practice of reusing secondary data. Mason asks researchers to be ‘purposefully investigative’, creative and interpretive, concerning their approach to data (ibid.: 1.4). While we completely endorse her agenda and have sought to follow her injunctions about investigative *practice* in the preceding section, here we seek to take her argument about investigative *epistemology* a little further.

We begin by noting that oral historians in Europe frequently assert that the tape recording is the primary source and that, however good the transcription or summary, these are inferior sources to the original recordings.¹⁰ There are good reasons for this preference as the recording gives access to a wide array of information is lost through transcription and even more in summary (accent and tone of voice, pace of delivery, pauses and hesitation, emphasis, embarrassment, humour, irony etc). An additional layer of complexity is introduced when, as in the case of the MMB, interview summaries are used in place of full transcripts. As an illustration, we reproduce below the summary of one interview as it appears in the MMB archive, together with our own transcription of the same source material, having listened to the interview at the British Library Sound Archive.

Interview summary:

09 FOOD/ the weekly routine. Boiled sheep's head was my favourite! Flossie always liked the tongue and Dad had the brains. No Fish and Chip shops then but there was a lady down the town who made a few chips. So many, you'd save some for the next night. Came home from school for lunch.

Transcription:

Interviewer: Can you [say], when you were a kid, whether there was a weekly routine as to what you had for meals?

Florence: Mostly, you see, you had a roast on Sunday, and although my mother went to church, we always had a roast. It was left in the oven and you usually had enough left cold for Monday. And then, well, Tuesday, if you were lucky, if it was lamb, you might have enough to stew for Tuesday. And then you'd have chops on Wednesday [pause] and then, oh, my favourite – a sheep's head, [to interviewer] I know you're looking horrified, my grandchildren cringe at the thought, but, oh, I thought it was lovely and I was always allowed the tongue.

Interviewer: How was it done?

Florence: Boiled, you boiled it with all the vegetables.

Interviewer: Whole?

Florence: Yes, oh yes. Well, they'd chop it straight through the middle and the brains were my father's treat and now I never see one. I don't suppose they'd be allowed to use it, but we thrived on it... When I was little, of course, there was no fish and chip shop but, erm, there was a lady down the bottom of the town who made a few chips. You could go there and you could, when the chip shop opened, you could have a pennyworth of chips and there was such a lot. They were almost enough for two nights.

Interviewer: So you'd heat them up the next night? [laughs] Fish on Friday?

Florence: Yes, yes, fish on Friday, always. And usually cold on a Saturday, don't know why but, usually cold ham or corned beef was a favourite.

Interviewer: Would you come home from lunch for school?

Florence: Yes, run home and get back. It'd be ready too.

Florence Jarvis, 1909, Aug 10 (speaker, female, Retail Business), C900/15104

The juxtaposition of these two representations of the same audio interview extract demonstrates how much is lost when a summary is used instead of a full transcript. Not only does the transcript provide much more detail of the weekly routine (stew on Tuesdays etc) but it also contains valuable material on the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (including, for example, the interviewer's apparent horror about eating sheep's head). While the summary captures the gender division between father and daughter ('Dad had the brains'), it misses other valuable intergenerational issues (such as the way the interviewee's grandchildren cringe at what she used to eat). The (embarrassed) laughter which followed the discussion of reheating yesterday's fish and chips was also much more obvious in the recording.¹¹ This only scratches the surface of the differences between different ways of recording and representing interview material – but it highlights the fact that there are epistemological implications associated with each of the technical and practical choices made.

Another practical issue with epistemological ramifications is whether or not the interviewer's voice is included alongside that of the interviewee. Without knowing what question was asked, it is impossible to say whether the interviewee is making an unsolicited remark or whether he or she is responding to a specific question. There are many examples of this in The Edwardians archive where the wording of the interviewer's question is picked up by the interviewee. For example:

Interviewer: Looking back, do you think your mother was average, or better than average manager?

Mr Keble: My mother was a wonderful manager, really (Interview 001).

Similar issues arise in '100 Families' where the interviewers struggled to solicit information on social class and where considerable ambiguity occurred in answer to questions such as 'Which group would you say you belonged to yourself?' On the other hand, if the interviewer's questions are not included (as in the MMB summaries), it is difficult to differentiate spontaneous comments from solicited responses.

We have already drawn attention to the value of ‘triangulating’ views from different accounts of the same situation. The following example from ‘100 Families’ reaffirms this point in the context of a father-son relationship where the son (Ian) insists that his father leads a lonely life following the death of Ian’s mother – a point that Ian’s wife (who was also present at the interview) is keen to affirm:

Ian: I always felt my father was a bit of a distant figure, I must admit. I didn't relate to him half as much as I related to my mother ... He would go out generally with my mother. I don't think my father operated solo very much... I don't think he operated on his own very much.

Interviewer: Did they have friends?

Ian: Yes.

Interviewer: Where did they live?

Ian: Neighbours. People my mother had met through work. She used to have quite a network of friends. She was quite a sociable person.

Ian’s wife: Your mother was a more sociable person than your father.

Ian: Dad tended to be a bit quieter and reserved.

Ian’s wife: He loved nothing more than a nice evening in with his wife.

Ian: ... The thing I find most distressing about my father is that he's forgotten that he lives in his own right and I said to him once - look the way you've approached life since my mother died I honestly feel that if you could have died on the same day you would have been quite happy.

Ian’s father (Leonard) gives a rather different impression of his friendship patterns and social life following his wife’s death:

Interviewer: On a day that you're not occupied with doing those sorts of jobs, how would you say you spend the day?

Leonard: Well, I've always got some kind of shopping to do obviously and then if I've got time on my hands, I usually visit friends. Yeah. I've got a lot of friends who I can - you know, on the spur of the moment, I can either ring or I can just go... I have a very close friend round - not far from here and I'm invited there every Sunday for lunch and spend part of the afternoon there and then - sometimes, I possibly go out for a drink in the local pub and things like that. But Sunday is spent that way. That's almost a ritual really. Get up of a morning, have breakfast, read the Sunday

papers, go round to my friend's place for lunch, possibly spend the afternoon there and have a light tea and then go out with her - she's a widow and - her son I get on very well with and we go out and have a drink and a chat and what-have-you and that's Sunday. That's a typical Sunday.

Again, the point is not to try to adjudicate on who is right or wrong here. Rather, the extracts suggest different subjective understandings of Leonard's pattern of sociality following his bereavement, including the development of a new relationship with the widow he describes as his 'very close friend'.

Probably the key epistemological question raised by life history research is the dialogical nature of the data, always involving an interplay of different temporalities, where the past is seen through the lens of the present and where a kind of 'telescoping' of the past frequently occurs. This is particularly apparent in the case of The Edwardians where interviewees were asked to focus on people's memories of the period before 1918, from the perspective of the 1970s, but not to dwell on the period in between. This comes through in several of the interviews where people's reminiscences are cut short with a rather crude injunction to return to the period in question ('To go back to the 1900-1918 part...', 'That was after 1918 then...', 'What about yourself up to the 1918 period...'). By contrast, in '100 Families', interviewees were encouraged to make comparisons between then and now, leading to a much more fruitful dialogue between past and present: 'Can you just describe meal times, as they used to be when you were younger, and nowadays, if it has changed?' and 'In what ways, if any, did you bring up your children differently compared to your upbringing'. We would argue that such an approach encouraged interviewees to be reflexive – recognising that reflexivity is not confined to researchers.

There is also a dialogical relationship between past and present in terms of how questions about the past are shaped by present-day concerns. A good example is the interest in tinned food which formed part of the interview schedule for '100 Families'.¹² The question had particular resonances at the time, particularly for the Scottish interviewees because of the sharp increase in the incidence of food poisoning in Scotland in the 1980s which offered a reminder of earlier outbreaks, most notably

the 1964 Aberdeen typhoid outbreak that was linked to imported corned beef from Argentina (Smith et al. 2006).¹³ Present day concerns can also be seen to shape memories of the past in numerous other ways. For example, in the MMB longstanding practices such as a preference for supermarket shopping are accounted for retrospectively in terms of present-day concerns (over BSE or GM-foods, for example).

Finally, there are many stylistic indicators within the transcripts that highlight the effects of interviewers in shaping interviewee narratives. A clear instance of this is the deference shown by interviewees in The Edwardian transcripts where interviewers are addressed as 'Sir' or 'Madam' while interviewees are called by their first names. In one extreme case (Interview 060), Mr Gyatt refers to the interviewer as 'Madam' seventeen times in a 45 page transcript. On other occasions, there is evidence of interviewees actively 'managing' the interview process (e.g. 'I might as well tell you the truth', Interview 118 or 'Is all this being recorded ... ooh heck', Interview 051).

Ethics

Before concluding we wish to draw attention to a range of ethical issues that arise in reusing these life history interviews. These include practical questions about how to edit the transcripts for publication: whether it is legitimate to leave phrases out, to run extracts together or to change their sequence, for example. There are also questions about the role of the analyst in interpreting data which they did not themselves collect. In a previous project, for example, we noted how the two researchers who had not recorded the interviews themselves experienced a greater sense of analytical distance than the original interviewer.¹⁴ Jennifer Mason (2007: 3.1) also refers to the analytical distance that can arise from the passage of time between the collection and re-analysis of data as well as in situations where those who do the re-analysis were not involved in the original study. Indeed, she argues, 'some forms of interpretation are *only possible from a distance*' (ibid.: 3.2, italicised in the original). These effects are usually swept under the carpet in secondary analyses of interview data but clearly warrant more detailed interrogation, as suggested by Mauthner and Doucet's (2003) discussion of researcher reflexivity.

Changes in technology also raise ethical issues. For example, while interviewees may have given consent for public access to their life histories they may have assumed that

this would be restricted to bona fide researchers consulting the interview transcripts at a library. Internet access (to transcripts and summaries and, in some cases, to the actual recordings) has greatly increased the accessibility of this material in ways that were unforeseen when interviewees originally gave their consent. It has become common practice among oral historians to request interviewees' permission before including interview extracts in publications (even when full consent has already been given), recognising that the context of publication can affect the interpretation of the interview. It is even more important, we would argue, to gain permission for using interview material in a museum exhibition or on the web where public accessibility is greatly enhanced and less readily policed.¹⁵ One possible way forward is to treat informed consent as part of an ongoing dialogue with interviewees that involves discussing outputs as well as the broader uses of their testimony. We have successfully undertaken this approach in earlier projects, including in the production of publications, a touring exhibition and a web site (<http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/foodstories>).

A particular ethical issue arose in our analysis of *The Edwardians* where interviewers' field notes were appended to some of the interview transcripts (all of which are available online). While this gave us some valuable insights into the mind-set of the interviewers (with whom we could not have any direct contact) and about contemporary social attitudes (including notions of respectability, for example), it raised particular ethical questions. In some cases the material is relatively benign, including subjective accounts of how the interview went from the interviewer's point of view. This might include flattering comments about the interviewee's alertness and cooperation, for example, or more negative comments on their perceived hostility. In other cases, however, it included supposedly 'off the record' material, given when the tape-recorder was switched off. Examples include comments on illegitimacy and adoption, childhood delinquency and shop-lifting, domestic violence and alcoholism, as well as 'hearsay' information about interviewees (gained from neighbours or mutual acquaintances). One interviewer provides details of a recent suicide attempt which had been explained to other family members as an accident, while another recorded details of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy which the interviewer noted that the interviewee did not want anyone else to hear about. Recording such information and making it publicly available clearly represents a breach of trust and raises serious

concerns about interviewer/interviewee confidentiality. It should, however, be noted that the research for *The Edwardians* was undertaken in the early 1970s, some twenty years prior to the development of the Oral History Society's ethical guidelines (<http://www.ohs.org.uk/ethics/index.php>).

Conclusions

In this paper we have considered the practical, epistemological and ethical challenges that arise in reusing three oral history archives in the context of our current research on 'Families Remembering Food'. Rather than approaching reuse as a purely practical issue that can be addressed through appropriate technical solutions, we have argued that reuse involves a range of epistemological issues that are characteristic of qualitative research, in general, and life history research, in particular. Our argument supports Mason's (2007: 3.3) call for a more complex understanding of reflexivity and interpretation. In particular, we argue that the question of (re)contextualisation lies at the core of debates about reuse, requiring a variety of reflexive strategies on the part of the researcher. But we have also argued that reflexivity amounts to much more than a recognition of our own positionality in relation to the original interviewees whose lives we are seeking to interpret. Rather, we have argued, the reuse of life history interviews requires a deeper acknowledgement of the dialogical nature of oral history research, where the past is approached through the lens of the present and where there are all kinds of complex interactions between researcher and researched.

We have also argued that interviewees are themselves reflexive subjects, capable of negotiating their role in the interview process. Reflexivity is not the sole preserve of interviewers and is part of the wider process of narrative construction and interpretation that we refer to here as dialogical. Secondary analysis adds new layers of complexity to this dialogical process but it is also characteristic of primary data analysis, supporting Bishop's (2005) assertion that the distinction between primary and secondary data analysis can be overdrawn. Our three data sources raise specific issues in terms of their effective reuse, ranging from questions about open-ended versus schedule-driven interviews to questions of format and accessibility (tapes, transcripts and/or summaries). We are convinced that these archives provide a rich source of information about changing families over the last century including the

critical role of food within family life. The effective reuse of these data, however, requires a rigorous and reflexive process of recontextualisation and a full appreciation of the dialogical nature of life history research.

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Notes

- ¹ The research was funded by The Leverhulme Trust (award no. F/00 118/AQ).
- ² Applicants for ESRC funding are required to declare that they have searched existing archives to ascertain whether data already exist that can be effectively reused prior to undertaking new rounds of data collection. They must also undertake to offer their own data for archiving in a form that encourages reuse.
- ³ Moore (2007) makes a strong case for a historically-informed sociology of reuse, while Savage (2007) demonstrates the value of reusing historical data from the Mass-Observation archive in studying changing class identities in post-war Britain.
- ⁴ The dialogical nature of social life was first recognised in the study of linguistics but has since been extended to a range of other fields (see Bakhtin 1981).
- ⁵ ‘Edwardians Online’ (<http://www.qualidata.ac.uk/edwardians/about/online.asp>) is a digital multi-media resource, integrating a range of primary and secondary sources about everyday life in Edwardian Britain. It includes interview summaries, sound clips, photographic images, background information and press reports on the original study plus details of publications arising from the collection.
- ⁶ The project ran from 1983 to 1986. It was directed by Howard Newby at the University of Essex and was entitled ‘Economic stagflation and social structure’ (ESRC award no. G00230093).
- ⁷ We have written about some of these issues elsewhere (see, for example, Olive & Jackson 2007; Smith 2007).
- ⁸ Each station broadcast 16 programmes in a series called ‘The Century Speaks’ reflecting on changes over the last 20, 50 and 100 years.
- ⁹ Indeed, when the researcher went to listen to the MMB recordings at the British Library she was told that only those interviews that had been copied from the original minidisks to CDs were available at the time. Only one of those she had pre-ordered was available in this format.
- ¹⁰ This is in contrast to the view of many oral historians in the United States who argue that a transcript that has been ‘corrected’ by the interviewee and annotated by the researcher becomes the primary document. For a useful discussion of the issues that arise in moving from voice to text, see Good (2006) and the classic paper by Samuel (1971).
- ¹¹ We intend to place a copy of the recording online so that readers can listen to the extract while reading the transcript.
- ¹² While Bishop (2007) takes the rise of tinned food as an index of the growing popularity of ‘convenience’ food, Blaxter (2007: 3.2) challenges this interpretation, arguing that the term ‘was certainly unknown to the population studied in the early 1980s’.
- ¹³ The number of cases of food poisoning in Scotland rose from 2700 in 1980 to 4200 in 1985 (<http://www.show.scot.nhs.uk>).
- ¹⁴ We are referring to a project on ‘Manufacturing meaning along the food commodity chain’, conducted as part of the AHRC-ESRC ‘Cultures of Consumption’ programme. In interpreting life history interviews with around 40 food producers, the researcher who had conducted the interviews (Polly Russell) felt much more constrained about generalising from the original sources than the other researchers (Neil Ward and Peter Jackson) who had not been involved in the interview process.
- ¹⁵ We have encountered this issue in previous research where interview extracts were included on a CD and website (<http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/foodstories>).