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Working with material from the Sheppey archive

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Abstract

This article reflects on the experience of working with archived data in the *Living and Working on Sheppey* project which revisited material from Ray Pahl's research on the Isle of Sheppey, published in the modern sociological classic, *Divisions of Labour* (1984). The article considers the reasons for revisiting archived material and some of the opportunities and challenges of working with archived material. For this discussion, we focus on one particular element of the original research: a collection of essays written by school leavers in 1978, and the archived notes from Pahl's preliminary analysis of these data. We also draw on interviews with Pahl about this aspect of his research, and our experience of repeating the essay-writing exercise. We conclude with some comments on the dynamic character of the archive.

Keywords

Archival Research, Community, Imagination, Secondary Analysis, Work, Youth

Introduction

Working with archived material allows new researchers to reread, re-contextualise, and reanalyse archived data and other materials, and it offers access to the sociological imagination of the original researcher(s). It can lead to new insights about old data, including critiques of former analyses. It can stimulate studies which replicate earlier designs or become new related projects in their own right. Perhaps most importantly, the availability of 'behind the scenes' (McLeod and Thomson, 2009: 125), contextual archived material beyond the formal data allows new researchers to re-examine the bases of the original analyses. Discussion of the 'Living and Working on Sheppey' project allows us to explore, first, why revisiting secondary data is a valuable exercise and what type of insights it can generate. Secondly, we discuss how we worked with different types of archived material (both formal data and contextual material). Thirdly, we consider the interest of these different types of material.

Since 2009, the 'Living and Working on Sheppey: Past, Present and Future' project¹ has been revisiting material from Ray Pahl's research on the Isle of Sheppey in the late 1970s and early 1980s, published in the modern sociological classic, *Divisions of Labour* (1984). The current project combines secondary analysis of archived data and material with new research replicating some of these data, as well as an original visual arts-based exploration of life and work on Sheppey. Its aim is to better understand the

¹ The Living and Working on Sheppey project was funded by the HEFCE-financed South East Coastal Communities Programme. The project team includes academics from sociology and arts at the Universities of Kent and Southampton, staff from the UK Data Archive, University of Essex, the artists group Tea, and members (staff and community volunteers) of the Blue Town Heritage Centre which is an information, resource and visitor centre on the history of Blue Town and the Isle of Sheppey. Until his death in June 2011, Ray Pahl was an informal consultant to the project.

experience of working life and community in the context of the decline of a single large employer – in this case, Sheerness Dockyard. We examine what this means for everyday life and working trajectories amongst people whose early lives or experiences of work were bound up with the Dockyard, either through formal employment or the informal economy that was connected to it. To this end, we have conducted 33 oral history interviews, echoing Pahl's interest and expanding his collection (with Nick Buck) on the creation and collapse of an occupational community. Additionally, we explore what this legacy and the accompanying socio-economic decline means for young people, with a focus on their aspirations. We do this with reference to two cohorts. We invited school pupils in 2009-10 (n=110) to write essays in imagining their future work and family lives, and have reanalysed the essays collected in a similar exercise undertaken by Pahl in 1978 (n=141).

This article has two main sections. First we consider the process of working with formal data from the archived material, focussing on the collection of essays written by young people. We discuss how and why we identified these data, how we processed them, our reactions to them, and directions of analysis. We then widen the discussion to consider other types of material that we have made use of to make better sense of the data. This took us beyond the formal archive to the memory banks of the original researcher. We conclude with some comments on the dynamic character of research archives.

Working with formal data from the Sheppey archive: the example of school leavers' essays on their futures

Materials from Pahl's research on Sheppey are prominent among the holdings of the National Social Policy and Social Change Archive (NSPSCA) (Qualidata) in the Albert Sloman Library at the University of Essex (UK). Pahl himself is recognised as a 'Pioneer of Social Research' for his methodological innovation in combining historical documentary research, surveys, interviews, ethnographic observations, and visual methods (<http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/>). In the original Sheppey studies, Pahl headed a research team whose remit was to explore different aspects of life and work on the Isle of Sheppey in north Kent. The research was composed of several sub-projects, some exploratory, some becoming more systematic studies of particular features of life and work on Sheppey². Pahl was explicit in *Divisions of Labour* about the ways in which a project evolves through 'informal and impressionistic research' (1984: 148). Indeed, the book is open and reflexive about methods ahead of this becoming a more mainstream sociological practice, building on his involvement with Bell and Newby's (1977) *Doing Sociological Research* which sought to provide realistic accounts of how sociological research actually got done.

² School Leavers Study, 1978: <http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=4867>; Creation and Collapse of an Occupational Community, the Case of Sheerness Naval Dockyard, 1950-1980: <http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=4873>; 17-19 and Unemployed on the Isle of Sheppey, 1980: <http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=4860>; Isle of Sheppey Survey, 1981: <http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=1986>; Social and Political Implications of Household Work Strategies, 1978-1983: <http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=4876>; Employers on the Isle of Sheppey, 1981-1985: <http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=4854>; Changing Sociological Construct of the Family, 1930-1986: <http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=4872>.

The original collection comprised 141³ essays written by school leavers in May 1978 (mainly 16-year-olds, 89 boys, 52 girls), imagining themselves towards the end of their lives and looking back. The essay writers were facing a bleak future as the labour market which they were set to join was characterised by historically high and rising unemployment levels, concentrated (then as now) disproportionately among young adults. The timing of the exercise, ‘about ten days before they were due to leave school’ (Pahl, 1978: 259), opened a window onto their world views which could then be fed into wider debates about what could be done to alleviate their adverse situation.

The school-leavers’ essays are mentioned in the inventory of archived materials from Pahl’s original Sheppey studies, and when we first visited Qualidata we were eager to read them. Since Pahl had published only one four-page journalistic article in *New Society*, entitled ‘Living without a job: how school leavers see the future’ (Pahl 1978), we saw immediately the potential for re-analysis. Once we started reading, we were struck by their humility and sad acceptance of social destiny, as well as hopefulness and breadth of imagination. These accounts were at odds with familiar popular depictions of young people as unwilling or unable to forge their own futures. Methodologically they offered a fascinating way of accessing aspiration and, substantively, they provided material for further analysing the experience of young people growing up on Sheppey in the decades following the closure of the Dockyard at Sheerness. Inspired by this material, and by ongoing research by Elliott (e.g. 2010) using National Child Development Study data, we replicated this exercise in 2009-10, and now have two sets of accounts of young people in somewhat similar circumstances, 30 years apart.

Struck by the richness of this material, we were surprised that Pahl had not explored it in more depth, although Wallace (1987), a researcher on the larger project, took the experience of young people in and out of work as the focus of what became her own distinct study. In Pahl’s *New Society* article, he acknowledged that his analysis did not do full justice to the essay material. For Pahl, still unfamiliar with the island’s economic, social and cultural structures, the essays were part of his efforts to understand how the chronic economic challenges of the time were affecting ordinary people’s everyday lives locally. They were one of his exploratory projects – ‘sort of a pilot thing’ (interview with Pahl, July 2009) – in his early days on Sheppey. In addition, Pahl had read about the essay-writing technique, first devised by Himmelweit et al (1952) and also used by Veness (1962), and thought it could be an effective tool for accessing young people’s perspectives.

A gain of returning to this material – along with the collection of new essays – at the present time is the ‘analytical distance’ that can be achieved through ‘the passage of time between the initial data collection and the ‘re-analysis’. This may be enhanced by the fact that the re-analysers were not involved in the original studies (Mason, 2007: 3.1). The local knowledge we have accrued through the present Living and Working on Sheppey project combined with new developments within sociology enable us to draw out additional themes from those identified at the time of the

³ Pahl (1978) gave the number of essays as 142, but reanalysis revealed incorrect numbering, there were in fact 141 essays.

original research, including turning points (Crow and Lyon, 2011), restudying community, and narrative identities.

Processing the essays: initial impressions and coding the data

Bethany Morgan Brett was the member of the research team responsible for processing the essays into a format which would allow analysis of the presence or absence of themes and imagined experiences between boys and girls and over time. This section is her account of this process and is therefore written in the first person.

The first task in making this collection reusable for the Living and Working on Sheppey project was to transcribe and digitise the 1978 essays. All of the essays were handwritten on exercise book paper so deciphering the writing was an initial challenge which required a keen eye and perseverance. Most of the essays contained significant spelling and grammatical errors but we retained these in order to maintain a sense of authenticity rather than ‘tidying them up’. Often the spelling errors and handwriting revealed something of the students’ personalities. One which made us smile was Essay 64 in which the student wrote that ‘to get a Job you have to have a cse [Certificate of Secondary Education] or O leve [Ordinary level] which is the educatshonl eqwithalant...’ {educational equivalent?}.

The essays often contained the student’s name, the class teacher’s name and mentions of other people. We carried out the anonymisation and transcription simultaneously, creating two copies of each file, one anonymised and one which retained identifying information so that should the research team manage to trace any of the former school students they could easily identify which essay that student had written.

Once the essays had been processed, it was possible to code them for further analysis. We decided to code the essays using SPSS. This was not an obvious choice of software since the material was not based upon a series of closed questions, however it allowed us to develop a wider thematic analysis and to reconstruct relations in terms of co-occurrences of different themes. For instance, we were able to look at patterns of how career aspirations or family life had changed over time and whether this was different for girls and boys. We based our coding around 63 variables in the thematic areas of health, consumption, education, mobility, family and work. Occasionally there were difficulties when a new theme emerged and this required some recoding. This became more complex once the 2010 essays were coded and some themes were cohort specific; for instance ‘internet search’ for how the student obtained their job in the 2010 cohort.

The essays were written as a creative exercise and were not originally designed to fit into a quantitative framework. This inevitably meant that some information could not be neatly coded and not all the information we were coding in the reanalysis of the data was necessarily captured. This also meant we had considerable missing data, but we found the presence or absence of areas of discussion across and between the 1978 and 2009-10 cohorts were themselves revealing. For instance, in coding when the girls imagined they would have their first child, the amount of missing data rose from 48.1% missing data in 1978 to 80.8% missing data in 2010. This, we suggest, could be indicative of a wider social shift which sees less importance placed on motherhood and more importance placed on career.

The basic coding of the data was important in providing a structure to our analysis, but we were also careful to re-examine and re-focus the analysis back on to the essays as a whole once this initial coding was completed. The essays presented fascinating stories of imagined lives so of course we did not want to ignore or lose this abundance of rich, qualitative data. Our SPSS analysis was used to complement the qualitative narrative element of our analysis. The SPSS spreadsheet also included columns where qualitative extracts and notes could be recorded. We made detailed notes on the ways in which the students presented their narratives and themselves in their stories. Each team member made notes on their observations and impressions whilst reading, transcribing, coding and analysing the data and recorded quotations which appropriately reflected their interpretations.

The essays were full of interesting and exciting data, and new themes were constantly emerging. My office colleagues began to tire of my saying 'just listen to this one!' Our emotional reactions to these essays were interesting to examine. How and why did some essays evoke humour, sadness, empathy or shock in us? Sometimes it was the elaborate language style used which raised a smile, such as Essay 17 in which the male pupil said about his romantic relationship 'I thought I loved her, maybe I did, I could only love once, I surmized with such a total honest sincerity. Why? I don't know. The answer would not aid me'. Or indeed Essay 9's unusual relationship status, 'at the age of thirty-six I had become one of the {randiest?!} managers going. I was on my sixth secartary when I found it to be more than a just elongated one night stand and she became my second wife'. During the initial analysis it was easy to be overly influenced by the more unusual essays. It would be easy to overgeneralise our initial interpretations based on the most memorable stories, but through working collaboratively, discussing our findings and identifying wider patterns through the quantitative coding, we were able to draw ourselves away from focusing on striking themes which threatened to overshadow the more mundane yet equally interesting and relevant stories. Our motivation for doing this was driven by concerns about 'cherry picking' from data about which many people, including Pahl (1984: 12), have warned.

Contextual material: notes and thoughts from Ray Pahl

Pahl fully recognised the 'messy process of research', and during the lifetime of the Sheppey studies, he did not discard the materials he had collected around the edges of the data. However, he also acknowledged that what 'stayed in the file' was often 'by chance' (interview with Pahl, July 2009), and that many of the research team's early ethnographic observations were exchanged verbally and not written down in any systematic way. There are, however, some hand- and type-written analytical exchanges in the archive. For restudy researchers, this means that the archive as it exists is already a selective slice of the project materials.

When the UK Data Archive expanded the range of its collection to include qualitative research (UK Data Archive, 2007), Pahl welcomed the opportunity to deposit the Sheppey materials and this was the first version of the archive that we encountered. However, in his capacity as consultant to the *Living and Working on Sheppey* project, our discussions also prompted new discoveries amongst his personal records of the research (a different kind of archive) some of which were given directly to us, others deposited along with the other data and materials at Essex, and others still of more obvious public interest, e.g. photographs, given to our community collaborators in the present project, the Blue Town Heritage Centre. Both these points - about the initial

research process, and the original researcher's interest in it rekindled by restudy researchers – demonstrate that collections of archived materials are always partial and not necessarily static.

When we first visited Qualidata, we were surprised to come across hand-written notes by Pahl, recorded on cards in the box with the essays. 'Total fantasy', says one (about essay 8); 'totally unrealistic idea of what he earns and what he gets – own house, car etc.' (re: 38) says another. It was fascinating to get these glimpses in early 2009 of Pahl's first impressions 30 years earlier. We asked him directly about this. He almost blushed, having 'completely forgotten' about the cards. The *New Society* article does not go into how the essays were analysed, and the possibility that archived material may shed light on such aspects of the research process that are often not fully described contributes to the opening up of the discussion of how data analysis is undertaken. Certainly the theme of fantasy in the lives of young people stayed with Pahl (e.g. 1995: 150-1).

The paper (and digital) Qualidata archive lacked any supporting information about the way in which the essays were collected. Having a living original researcher accessible to us meant that we had the opportunity to ask specific questions and discuss what Pahl remembered of the research process. Some things had been forgotten, and were unretrievable, but some gaps could be filled. For instance, he explained the context in which the essays were collected. It was through a good contact with an English teacher who was convinced by the idea of the essay-writing exercise and who promised him to 'talk to my colleagues and fix it up for you' that the research took place. As Pahl put it, 'there was one person who brought it all together', and the essays indicate that this teacher recruited seven colleagues to set the task for their classes (the teachers' names are at the top of the pages). Although this strategy of using of an informant to get young people to write the essays was effective in terms of the production of data, it meant that Pahl 'didn't have control over the data collection process' and he further commented that some of the other teachers 'who were less committed to the idea and hadn't met me, perhaps didn't quite know what was wanted' (interview with Pahl, July 2009).

Despite our discussions directly with Pahl, we have limited information about the setting, time, location and who was present when the essays were written. Although we know the general instructions that teachers were given, we cannot know how that message was delivered. And as Pahl acknowledges, as the message was passed to people more distant from him, it may have been modified. Were the instructions read out by teachers to their students as a script? Were the instructions consistent across different classrooms and teachers? How were the instructions interpreted by the teachers and/or students? We can get glimpses of teachers' or pupils' different interpretations working backwards from the essays themselves. Most follow the correct instructions and look back over their lives, but some are written in the future tense. Indeed, it is evident from the essays that some classes were told to imagine recounting their lives to their grandchildren, while others followed the formula of looking back from when they were older (e.g. essay 76 is headed 'Looking back at 60').

We know that most essays were probably written in the classroom environment, but we do not know under what conditions these were set. Were they set as a test? Were

students allowed to talk to one another about what they were writing? Certainly we came across a couple of cases where conferring was evident. For instance we could easily envisage the two cheeky boys copying each other in Essays 83 and 84 where they both wrote about being annoyed by a particular teacher who was a real 'square basher' and the rhyme that they had made for him where they would call 'Watch out! Watch out! Hutley's about'. However, were any essays written as homework, and if so what influence if any did family members or the home environment have on the final essay?

Indeed, as a research team reading through these essays, we often wondered and discussed whose voices we were hearing in the stories, and with what audience in mind they were written. Were the young people's voices influenced by the teacher, their classmates, parents or a story from the media? Were they the expression of 'internal conversations' (Archer, 2007), or other people's aspirations for the author? To what extent did they reflect family sayings or wider community wisdom as resources or repertoires for sense-making? For instance, some essays offered a glimpse into the family life and conversations that were being had at home during that time. In Essay 77 the male author wrote, 'My old man said to me that I couldn't have a penchen because I mite or he said I probably wouldn't live that long. Thank you dad. My dad said that they take the money from [you] and they only give you a little at the end and you wouldn't live much over 60. So that was it.'

Contextual knowledge is often associated, sometimes exclusively, with the original researcher's experience of 'being there' (McLeod and Thomson, 2009: 135). However, the fact that Pahl was not in the classroom himself and never had more detailed information himself means that there is less of a distinction between the original researcher and the current team engaged in the restudy. The use of what might nowadays be called 'community collaborators' in Pahl's original research (the school teachers who oversaw the essay-writing exercise) problematises this distinction in a useful way. It allows us to find new ways of 'being present' with the data 30 years on. To use the terms Bishop (2006) discusses, the 'conversation' (essays in our case) is preserved, the 'situation' was only ever partially known, and the bigger 'project' is well documented.

We have no information about the social characteristics of the essay writers, no details of their family or class backgrounds, other than the fact that they had 'failed' the 11 plus examination which pupils had to pass to go to grammar school. There was vigorous debate at the time about comprehensive secondary education in Kent, which (then as now) operated a system of grammar schools and others, with no grammar school on Sheppey. At best, we can make guesses about some of these personal details from the assumptions that underpin their accounts, but this would have been valuable information to record (cf Elliott, 2010). However, what is missing in detail is partly compensated for by the geographical concentration of the setting. The 1978 essays were collected in the same time period, in the same school, from pupils in the same year, all living on Sheppey and imagining their futures from this context. The social composition of the population of Sheppey and, we can surmise, the parents of the pupils at the school was (and still is) relatively narrow, but although they were working-class and their children mostly imagined working-class lives for themselves, Pahl was keen to emphasise that islanders stood out in their aspirations to owner-occupation, and achieved them more than might have been expected (1984: 175-6), so

that many of them could be regarded as part of a 'middle mass' bridging the traditional working-class/middle-class divide. The gain of this singular location makes the essays collected on Sheppey an especially interesting collection in the context of debates about the significance of distinctive local contexts in which fieldwork is conducted.

Conclusions

This article has sought to build on Mason's discussion of 'what happens, what is involved, what can and cannot be achieved' (Mason, 2007: 1.3) when working with archived material, focusing on our engagement with Ray Pahl's work on the Isle of Sheppey in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the process of writing this article, we have better appreciated the different forms that archived material may take, and how it may change over time, including as a result of new interest in an old project. In the research presented here, we make use of formal data and informal contextual material already deposited in the UK Data Archive (Qualidata), and further contextual material that 'came our way' as a result of our interest. Crucially, the access we had to the original researcher, Ray Pahl, gave us the opportunity to explicitly confront, with him, the absences and gaps in design and context from his earlier research. This meant that we could gain more contextual data than was presented in the archive itself, even if not all of the context of the original research could be recovered, as it was unknown at the time, was never documented, or had been forgotten. The issue of the partial nature of the archive and the inherent incompleteness of contextual material is a general issue facing restudy researchers. The questions restudy researchers can answer are shaped by the nature of contextual material which alternately sheds new light on existing data or closes down lines of analysis. However, we would argue that this kind of limitation might be thought of as a stark amplification of what all researchers face. As the anthropologist, Michael Taussig discusses, attempts at documenting research in progress sometimes have the effect of 'multiply[ing] the distance' between the researcher and what the written account in field notes is intended to grasp (2011: 19). True, it is possible for the social researcher working in the present to find new ways to generate data and document contextual material, but there are always absences.

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