Secondary Analysis of Dennis Marsden *Mothers Alone*

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Abstract

A secondary analysis has been made of 116 interviews with unmarried mothers carried out by Dennis Marsden in the mid-1960s. These are now held at ESDS Qualidata, University of Essex. They are being used in a wider study of unmarried motherhood in Britain since 1918. There are significant differences in research practices then and now: the interviewer did not obtain the interviewees consent to use the interviews in his research; the interviews were not recorded and transcribed verbatim, but reconstructed from notes and memory after the interview; the reconstructed interviews contain personal comments by the interviewer about the interviewees which would not now be acceptable; the interviewer was much less aware of the importance of class and gender dynamics in an interview situation than would now be the case. Hence the interviews are revealing about the history of social research as well as about the history of unmarried motherhood. These methodological changes mean that, like all sources. The interviews have to read be critically and with caution. Nonetheless they are revealing about the experience of unmarried motherhood in the mid-twentieth century.

Introduction

We are in the second year of an ESRC funded project on ‘Unmarried Motherhood in England and Wales, 1918-1995’. We are both historians by training. The project will be the first detailed study of unmarried motherhood in England and Wales between World War I and the 1970s. An important resource to be used in the project is re-analysis of the data used by Dennis Marsden in his book *Mothers Alone: Poverty and the Fatherless Family* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1969) to study the evidence it provides of changes since 1918 in the experiences of unmarried mothers and their children and in attitudes to, and treatment of them by, the community and by official and unofficial agencies; as well as the influences upon and outcomes of government policy and administration in relation to them.

The main data sources for the project as a whole are the archive of the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and Her Child (founded 1918), now One Parent Families, which is held at the Women’s Library, London Metropolitan University, and data in The National Archives (TNA) at Kew. Another key resource is the Dennis Marsden collection at ESDS Qualidata, University of Essex which includes 116 interviews which Marsden carried out with lone mothers in the mid-1960s (UK Data Archive 2006).

We aim to increase understanding of recent changes in demography and family structure, particularly the growth since the 1970s of unmarried parenthood. We suggest that the growth in unmarried motherhood since
the 1970s has a longer history than is always appreciated and that recent attitudinal and structural aspects of family life are not historically new. Rather they represent a return to much older norms which prevailed until the beginning of the twentieth century of serial partnerships, complex families and late marriage ages, though in a different mortality regime and legal and cultural context from that of earlier periods. Surprisingly little is known about unmarried motherhood in Britain between the beginning of the twentieth century and the 1970s. We do not even have clear statistics of the numbers of unmarried mothers who kept and brought up their children. There are hints in the sources that attitudes toward unmarried mothers, at least in some working class communities, in the 1920s and 1930s were more sympathetic than they became in the 1940s and 1950s. The period from the end of World War 2 to the 1970s, which is sometimes represented as an historical norm in demographic terms, is actually an historically highly unusual period of very high marriage rates, low age at marriage, long-lasting marriages (due to both lengthening life expectancy and low divorce rates) and low levels of illegitimacy, which was heavily socially stigmatized. We aim to explore the reality for unmarried mothers and their children which lie behind the hints and generalizations in existing texts. Apart from the Marsden interviews, the rich archives of One Parent Families, data in TNA, interviews we will carry out with surviving mothers and children, memoirs and social surveys (such as those held by the Mass Observation archive at the University of Sussex) will provide further context.

This paper is concerned only with our use of the Dennis Marsden interviews and their context. His survey of lone mothers was originally part of Peter Townsend’s wider project on Poverty in the UK, which was eventually published in 1979 (Townsend 1979). Marsden, like Townsend, had received his early experience of sociological research working with the Institute of Community Studies, which Michael Young established in Bethnal Green, East London in 1954. This encouraged descriptive, empirical, empathetical study of working class life, with the explicit policy aims of describing social conditions in order to advocate policy change. The Institute produced such classics as Michael Young and Peter Wilmot’s Family and Kinship and East London (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957) and Peter Townsend’s The Family Life of Old People (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957).

Marsden’s research was also driven by the desire to put pressure on the government to give greater support to fatherless families, which was a serious issue in the 1960s, as it still is today. The aim of his interviews was to describe the lives of lone mothers in their own words in order to assist this campaign. Though we are particularly interested in unmarried mothers, Marsden also interviewed widowed, divorced and separated mothers. He and other campaigners were keen to stress how much these fatherless families had in common, in particular poverty and lack of support from fathers, though for diverse reasons. Partly, we suspect, they aimed to overcome negative attitudes at the time towards unmarried and divorced mothers by stressing the similarity of their conditions with those of less stigmatized groups such as widows. It is important to remember how widely unmarried and divorced mothers were still stigmatized even in the supposedly ‘swinging’ sixties.

**Marsden’s Methods**

Marsden interviewed 116 mothers in two towns, one in northern England one in the south. Fifty-nine of these women had given birth to children outside marriage. Since he was especially concerned with poverty, his sample was drawn from the list of local National Assistance Board (NAB) claimants, so they were all families on low incomes. Not everyone in his sample agreed to be interviewed. Among other reasons, the association with the NAB caused some women to fear that Marsden was an official aiming to snoop on them for the authorities. We have analysed only the interviews with unmarried mothers.

Full transcripts of the interviews survive in the ESDS Qualidata archive. The original paper copies have been scanned by ESDS Qualidata and we have analysed them using the CAQDAS package NVivo. There a number of differences between the approach Marsden took to his work and that which would be typical today and these are the main focus of this paper. We need to understand the nature of and the reasons for these differences in order to contextualize his work. Fortunately Marsden is still alive and was willing to be
interviewed about his work, though by correspondence rather than face-to-face since he is in poor health. He replied very fully and helpfully to our written questions.

The main differences between Marsden’s practices and those conventional now are:

1. He did not obtain the women’s written consent to use the interviews in his research. This was not the norm in the 1960s. Also Marsden wrote that he did not press the point because he knew that some of the women would be unwilling to give their signatures because they were suspicious of his motives and afraid that he might report them e.g. for minor social security fiddles. He did protect their anonymity in his published work and they would be extremely hard to identify. He replied to our question that he now felt worried about:

   how simplistically we viewed ‘consent’ … I used to regard the interviews as a kind of ‘smash and grab raid’ – gain access, explain my general purpose and get consent (to be interviewed), then get as much information as possible before leaving (This was of course not carried out in such a harsh manner as it sounds).’

2. He did not use a tape-recorder. In the 1960s they were big, clumsy and intrusive and interviewers tended to avoid them because they often disturbed interviewees and undermined the interview. Marsden made notes during the interview and as soon as possible afterwards he would try to reconstruct it by making his own tape-recording of his recollection of the interview from his notes and his memory. So the transcripts in the ESDS Qualidata archive are not verbatim transcripts of the actual interview or of the actual words of the interviewee but of Marsden’s notes and recollection of the interview. Clearly, then, they have been filtered by Marsden’s memory. We simply have no way of knowing in what ways the surviving transcripts differ from the actual interviews or what biases may have been – probably unconsciously – introduced in the process of transcription.

3. One thing that surprised and rather shocked us about the transcripts were Marsden’s personal comments about the mothers which he included in his recordings – sometimes disparaging about their appearance, their homes, their language. He gave a great deal of space at the beginning of each recording to descriptions of the physical appearance, attractiveness in his eyes, clothes and intellectual capacities of the interviewees. Sometimes the descriptions provide useful context, about the women and about Marsden’s own attitudes and those of his time, but sometimes they are of a kind that would now be thought unacceptable. For example, when interviewing someone he described as a member of the ‘underclass’ he commented that:

   It was a curious experience sitting there, in this substratum 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.

   [Lone Mothers Study, Interview 112]

He described these women as ‘huddling together’ against a hostile world. He reiterated how he could not easily understand the language of the West Indian women he met. About one woman he stated:

   As with all the other West Indians the subtler points of her situation could not be explored because of the language difficulty and the sheer distractions in the room and the fact that she was not particularly articulate.

   [Lone Mothers Study, Interview 21. See also interviews 116 and 60]
He did however learn from these interviews: that, contrary to popular belief at the time, illegitimacy was not common in the West Indies and unmarried mothers did suffer stigma:

Contrary to what I’d heard, people do get married in the West Indies and it was a fairly shocking thing to have a baby without being married

[Lone Mothers Study, Interview 60]

And he admired the mothering skills of most of the West Indian mothers and the fact that they were smartly dressed and clean. He described one as ‘one of the best adjusted mothers I have seen’ [[Lone Mothers Study, Interview 4].

Sometimes he shows a certain self-awareness. He commented of one woman, (not of West Indian origin):

Somebody like this brings home very clearly the National Assistance Board’s problems. You might sympathize very much with the sort of problems which Mrs M. faces, while disliking extremely her person and her manner of coping and standards of coping.

[Lone Mothers Study, Interview 70]

Such comments are revealing about the class, race and gender attitudes that could be openly expressed in the mid 1960s by a highly educated, left-leaning, socially conscious sociologist. We need to understand social and cultural changes since the 1960s if we are fully to contextualize the research of the period. This is where our knowledge of, and wider reading about, the period, as historians of the twentieth century is valuable in enabling us to interpret the documents. When questioned about his class attitudes, Marsden became quite defensive and anxious to tell us that he came from a working class background and had a Yorkshire accent, both of which are true, but not inconsistent with the probably unconscious patronage of his comments on the interviewees.

4. Marsden recognizes that he was much less sensitive than interviewers would now be to the power dynamics of an interview by a middle class male of a less privileged female. He does not wholly accept however, and would like to deny, that they would have seen him as middle-class, even though he comments elsewhere that some of them were suspicious of him as a possible informer to the social security authorities. He admits that he was working in what he calls ‘pre-feminist times’ and that he would now have had to reflect more about gender. However, he is still inclined to deny that gender dynamics really affected the interviews because ‘I am anything but a macho man’ and he felt that the women found it easy to confide in him.

These are the main differences between Marsden’s practice in the 1960s and the norms which prevail now. We need to understand these differences to interpret the work.

Notes
1 Kiernan, K., Land, H., and Lewis J. (1998) Lone Parent Families in Twentieth Century Britain focuses mainly on the period since 1970s and notes the paucity of study of the earlier period.

2 The interviews are available as PDF documents at Dennis Marsden Mothers Alone: Poverty and the Fatherless Family, 1955-1966 [computer file]. University of Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], February 2005. SN: 5072. Dennis Marsden and the UK Data Archive bear no responsibility for the further analysis and interpretation of these interviews.
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