***MIRRA (Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access) research project data deposit interview transcripts: group four***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Title | *MIRRA (Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access) research project data deposit interview transcripts: group four* |
| Author | *Elizabeth Shepherd, Victoria Hoyle, Elizabeth Lomas, Andrew Flinn* |
| categories and subcategories | Humanities, Archival, Repository and Related Studies |
| Item type | Dataset |
| Keywords | *identity, information rights, memory, care-experienced, records* |
| Description | *This archive represents the fieldwork data from an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project ‘MIRRA’, based at UCL and led by Professor Elizabeth Shepherd. It began in October 2017 and was initially funded until October 2019. The project consisted of a detailed study of the public and voluntary sectors in England responsible for the management of child social care records and data. The research team considered both current and historic (from 1970) recordkeeping practices. The central research question was: how can we better understand the information rights ecology in the public and voluntary sectors in order to support individuals and public authorities in navigating it?*  *A participatory approach was adopted, in which a small group of care-experienced people were recruited as ‘co-researchers’. Members of this cohort had all sought access to records of their childhoods at different stages of their lives. Primary data collection was undertaken using a mixed methods approach, gathering qualitative data from respondents from four communities of knowledge, expertise and practice: care-experienced people, social workers and information professionals and academic researchers. Despite the participation of individuals and groups with different skills and expertise, the research was nevertheless oriented towards the perspectives and viewpoints of care leavers themselves, as the people with a personal and emotional stake in social care records. Their expertise and knowledge was given precedence in the research design and outcomes. This was particularly important in rebalancing the distribution of power in relation to care records, which is usually tipped in favour of practitioners and policy-makers. This archive contains verbatim (albeit anonymised) transcripts from individual interviews, focus groups and workshop meetings.* |
| Participants | *In total, over 80 individuals provided data to the project between March 2018 and June 2019. These include 21 adult care leavers. Demographic information was not formally collected from contributors, as the project focused on qualitative narratives of personal experience. However, detailed biographical information could be gleaned from their testimonies. The care leavers ranged in age from 18 to 85 years old; all had experienced foster and/or residential care in England between the late 1940s and 2018. Approximately one third had been in the care of voluntary organizations for all or some of their care experience, and the others exclusively looked after by local authorities. They were in care for varying lengths of time, in different parts of the country and for different reasons. Each person had a unique journey, entering and leaving care at a different age, representing the diversity of care over time and place. This diversity impacted on the types, form and extent of care records available from their respective childhoods, reflecting changes in recordkeeping practices over the 80-year period (Hoyle et al., 2019). The rich data from the 21 care experienced testimonies, although not generalizable, represent a significant and detailed exploration of the issues they wished to raise. Sixteen care-leaver contributors had accessed their care records; four had made a conscious decision not to; and one was in the process of doing so.* |
| Funding | *Arts and Humanities Research Council. GRANT TITLE: Navigating the public information rights ecology: a recordkeeping perspective on supporting information rights.**Grant Ref: AH/P008941/1* |
|  | *The MIRRA project created a number of resources to support the rights of care leavers, and to help social care practitioners, information professionals and academic researchers fulfil their duties and responsibilities.  Links to all of them can be found at:*  [*https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/resources/*](https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/resources/)  *A full list is:*  ***Podcast***  *Miriam Antcliffe, Research in Practice Research and Development Officer, speaks to John-george and Darren who share their personal stories of accessing their care files as adults:*  [*https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/podcasts/reflections-on-accessing-care-records-and-supporting-good-recording/*](https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/podcasts/reflections-on-accessing-care-records-and-supporting-good-recording/)  ***Project Leaflets***  *MIRRA Research Leaflet: Description and Actions* [*https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/MIRRAUpdatedLeafletWebVersion.pdf*](https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/MIRRAUpdatedLeafletWebVersion.pdf)  *MIRRA Poster: Findings*  [*https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/MIRRA-poster-A1\_v03-003.pdf*](https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/MIRRA-poster-A1_v03-003.pdf)  ***Case Study reports***  *Care Leavers Experiences*  [*https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/Care-Leavers-Experiences.pdf*](https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/Care-Leavers-Experiences.pdf)  ***Practitioner Perspectives***  [*https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/Practitioner-Perspectives.pdf*](https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/files/2019/07/Practitioner-Perspectives.pdf)  ***Film***  ***Short Film***  *A short film from 2019 introduces the MIRRA research project themes*  <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xs28tczL3yA>  ***Research Symposium***  *All of the presentations from our symposium on 18th July 2019 were filmed and can be found on YouTube via the link below.*  [*https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLIxEKZAfBRCij3qPuX98ucTnAhq2a09QH*](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLIxEKZAfBRCij3qPuX98ucTnAhq2a09QH)  ***Family Connect website***  *FamilyConnect helps adults who have been adopted or in care find answers to questions about their origins. MIRRA has been working with*[*Family Connect*](https://www.familyconnect.org.uk/)*, who have been fantastic in supporting our work.*  [*https://www.familyconnect.org.uk/*](https://www.familyconnect.org.uk/)  ***Project publications***  [*Hoyle, V., Shepherd, E.,  Flinn, A. and Lomas, E (2019) “Child Social-Care Recording and the Information Rights of Care-Experienced People: A Recordkeeping Perspective” in the The British Journal of Social Work  https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy115 (*](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy115)*Open Access – Free to All*[*)*](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy115)  *Shepherd, E., Hoyle, V., Lomas, E., Flinn, A., Sexton, A. (2020). Towards a Human-Centred Participatory Approach to Child Social Care Recordkeeping. Archival Science. 20(4), 307-325.*[*http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10502-020-09338-9*](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fdx.doi.org%2F10.1007%2Fs10502-020-09338-9&data=04%7C01%7C%7C24d1f78b423e438b9dc808d8b334b6bc%7C1faf88fea9984c5b93c9210a11d9a5c2%7C0%7C0%7C637456386271647459%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=8KI3OO1oQvxE1%2BHIfh8uz2JC6eDrsh4DFrkt8hn78fQ%3D&reserved=0)*Gold Open Access.*  *Hoyle V, Shepherd E, Lomas E, Flinn A (2020). Recordkeeping and the life-long memory and identity needs of care-experienced children and young people. Child and Family Social Work.*[*https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12778*](https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12778)*Gold Open Access.* |

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held 23rd May 2018 between participant G401 and Victoria Hoyle, at UCL. The participant has elected to remain anonymous in this research.

BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW

**Victoria**

So if you could start by just briefly describing your field of specialism and your research interests.

**G401**

I’m a social scientist, based in a department of medicine and health, and before that spent a number of years as a researcher in an academic social work department, but I was originally trained as a sociologist. My research interests focus on children’s mental health and though my training, my background is more as a historical sociologist interested in children’s experiences and professional interventions, particularly social workers and other clinicians, in recent years I’ve become increasingly interested also in quantitative approaches and how these can be combined in terms of using routine data and data collected in the course of for example randomised control trials that might be pooled or brought together in different ways, which has led to an interest for example in data integration, in the ethics and pragmatics of data sharing and also the kind of temporalities of these type of documents and the meaning of records when their original context is changed.

**Victoria**

All very relevant and interesting to this research. So in terms of child social care records, have you used those specifically in any of your research projects?

**G401**

Aha, so when I was working in an academic social work department I had two projects that involved looking at social work case records. In one case this was cases that had been recently closed, we were looking at whether a change in how risk was managed by social workers and social work managers had implications for what happened to these cases, and then another project that combined interviews with practitioners and service users and also looking at their case records whilst the cases were live, so there was definitely a sense through that that the case record has its limitations as a source of information but is really fascinating when put together with other things. And then I’m also involved in projects now that whilst are not social care records have…they touch upon this, so for example, looking at health records where read codes for child maltreatment signal social care needs but within health datasets, so for example GP records or mental health service provider records.

**Victoria**

So the case records are particularly interesting to us because that’s where our research is focused in terms of care leavers rights to access information themselves, and you talked about the ways in which those records might be valuable, and I wondered if you could expand a little bit on that, as to what you think the research value of case records can be or could be?

**G401**

So from what I recall there was a recent article by David Wilkins looking at…whose just moved to Cardiff but he was at Bedfordshire…and he was looking at the discourses used in case records in social work and what are the purposes of this, and the headline conclusion if I remember correctly was that the way in which the reports are written is not really to convey information that would be useful for someone picking it up but rather defensively in justification in case there’s a serious case review or something, and so therefore the case notes are not in any way regardable as a verifiable representation of what’s taking place, but they are an interesting record of the kinds of justifications the practitioner feels need to be included if something goes wrong. So therefore it’s a potential entry into liability chains but then that does offer an interesting insight into what are the perceived threats, so for example interesting to look at these…an interest I found in them was the way in which interprofessional working is described, where the assumption is that there’s very significant possibilities for breakdown in relationships between professionals and so therefore the case record, if that’s able to preserve some of the documentation of interaction, that can defend a service from a situation of finger pointing, where health say this was your responsibility and social care can then say no last contact was yours and so therefore… so that’s a liability chain but at the same time it also offers really interesting documentation of the kind of natural history of the movement of cases through different services.

**Victoria**

So, you seem to be suggesting that these case records are more useful to reflect upon social work practice than necessarily to reflect on the experiences of the child or young person for example, am I right in saying that?

**G401**

Well, I…in the projects that I’ve looked at I was not looking at the records of children in care, I was looking at the records of children who were seen under child in need or child protection services, so therefore that’s probably got some pertinence here. But I guess I’m making two distinct points, one is that the angle with which these reports are written is towards the protection of the organisation and the practitioner writing them. However, that doesn’t mean that they can’t be rich and used for other purposes including understanding something about how practice is working and maybe also about the lives of young people, families and interprofessional working and the kind of ecology of services and interactions around care.

**Victoria**

So thinking again about the experiences you’ve had of using these records, and you’ve said that it’s children in need and child protection records that you used particularly, how did you go about finding and identifying the relevant materials and then gaining access to them?

**G401**

Ok, so with one project the local authority had an innovation in practice that they wanted an evaluation conducted on, and as part of that we said that we would need to see records of cases where the innovation had been included and cases where the innovation hadn’t been included, we’d need to interview practitioners, we’d need to interview families…and it was quite tricky actually. The service was in a fair bit of turmoil, but in a way that I don’t think is unrepresentative of local authorities and Children’s Services in general, so that even though the service was kind of committed to this and you know, saw it as relevant, it wasn’t core business for them and couldn’t be, they were trying to keep their heads above water, and in that context it made it difficult to find allies within the service who were able to keep moving through potential blocks. Additionally trying to do this without any funding was very challenging, and in retrospect probably should have been fatal, but we kind of got strung along on the assumption that some funding would come eventually and it didn’t, but the work continued regardless… So therefore the cases were those that were relevant to that initiative. I’m afraid I’ve lost track of whether specific service user consent was sought for using the individual cases, I’m guessing it must have been but I’ve lost track of that it was a few years ago. In the other case where it was live cases that was again a local authority approaching us because they had an innovation that they were doing in practice. This was in some ways related to the ‘Troubled Families’ agenda money and evaluations of different practices there, and that was work with families where we were interviewing the families that we were also looking at the case records for. And again, as it were, the families were sourced…the ones who were seen by the project. Both of these were I guess ultimately quite disappointing experiences, because I don’t think either project, either study was of a quality that it was able to do more than offer a commentary on the practice. The current work that I’m doing with a local authority, where we’ve not yet got access to the data, and in fact actually will not be accessing case records in the first instance but material gleaned from the case records, I think is more exciting because that’s going to have the prospect of doing genuine evaluation of what’s going on in changing practice and which has potential national implications. In that the question is about how and when cases are escalated from child in need to child protection and from child protection to courts, in a context in which the rates of escalation have increased very substantially across the country since 2008-9, and the availability of resource to support these children has shrunk or certainly not grown, so therefore there’s quite an appetite for trying to understand the processes. I don’t think the work that I’ve previously done looking at the case records directly spoke very much beyond those particular cases but I do feel that I was able to get an insight into the social work process through the case records that would have been impossible through just interviews.

**Victoria**

This most recent project in development with a local authority you said that you were going to kind of extracting data…

**G401**

Aha, so technically they’re going to be extracting the data because – and I guess this is pertinent – because the clearance that we would require in order to be able to look at their data directly is conceivable but would take 18 months, 2 years, and given that the goal of this piece of work with local authorities is partly relationship building they’re going to as it were supply us with the data so that we can get something out, proof of concept, and then go for less low hanging fruit.

**Victoria**

And at the moment do you know which data elements you will be gaining access to?

**G401**

So what we’re doing in order to be able to understand that is…they have a training module using fictional data that trains their social workers on how to enter the system and they’re going to send us on the training course for using the system, so therefore we’ll then have a sense of what data is being collected because we can’t look at actual cases without consent.

**Victoria**

And I suppose understanding the system itself is necessary before you can then identify which elements and information you are going to need?

**G401**

I think that that’s the same process ultimately at this stage…essentially looking to see what social workers are entering will help us to understand what it’s possible to extract.

**Victoria**

And when that data is extracted, is that going to be on a consent basis or anonymised, or do you have a sense yet?

**G401**

It’s going to be anonymised operational data. Something that I’d like to see ultimately would be a local authority-wide addition to their consent form that includes a section about how data will be used, but I think that we need to do more proof of concept that research can be relevant to core business within the local authority first.

**Victoria**

That’s very relevant to my next question which is about making the case for access to this kind of material and we’ve talked a little bit outside of the interview about cultures of information management and access. Do you think that there is a… Let me rephrase that: what are the challenges or barriers to accessing this kind of information for research?

**G401**

So I spent five years in a social work research department where I learned to understand that access to data was simply to be put in the too hard category, unless you already had funding but funding comes from already having proof of concept. It felt impossible. When I moved to my current job in a health research context it was taken for granted that you developed networks with clinicians and local services, that they’d pass their data to you, that you’d inform the quality and improvement of services. So for example, the Oxford primary care department has a network of 40, 42, local GP practices that feed their data to Oxford and Oxford feedback insights and they have a strong symbiotic relationship where it’s just taken for granted. So it’s a move from one context to the other that really made it salient to me that social care data is in a very different state to health data, and that it needn’t be the case. So for example, a report was issued just today by the MRC [Medical Research Council] on the landscape of the UK data research infrastructure and there’s a section there on health and social care that never mentions social care again after the title…

**Victoria**

No that’s quite often the case I think.

**G401**

…And lists all the resources going in and then lists further areas of opportunity or current areas that are missing, and no further mention of social care, so it feels to me like I’m quite an amateur, that there surely should have been someone before me who has cracked this and published from work collaborating with a local authority. The data is so important and critical, it affects people’s lives in such a profound way, the local authorities have to hang on to it and are dealing with it and processing it anyway, why is it not being linked to research? I guess my entry point to here is a sense of bafflement that that hasn’t happened. It’s not my training but it’s clearly not something that there’s already an infrastructure for, therefore my ambition…though its hard on top of the day job…is to try to make space for contributing to that kind of infrastructure. I’m in my 30s, there’s a lot of career ahead and my hope is that essentially by just continuing to chip away at this and build alliances and show the mutual benefits that can come, that over time social care can move to a position that is closer to health, where the whole thing is just thought about more. Because in a way it’s not necessarily that I think health have it exactly right, so much as that a lot of thought goes into it, and you have people, for example, thinking professionally about the ethics of these things or lawyers who specialise, whereas in social care the whole thing seems rather amateurish.

**Victoria**

Mmmm. It makes me smile to hear you observe this phrase ‘health and social care’, where the social care part is in the title only, and it never seems to have its full share of the content of any report or research.

**G401**

Exactly.

**Victoria**

And I wondered to what extent you thought the way… that the governance of social care has a bearing on this? I’m aware that adult social care is much more closely allied to health services perhaps than child social care, and I’ve wondered to what extent that might explain some of the differences in culture between.

**G401**

The DH is probably also important here, as is the Department of Education, so as I understand it…so there’s a school of adult social care research but there’s not a school of children’s social care research and I understand that one of the reasons for this is that the divisions between the different government departments meant that adult social care was included but children’s social care was not, so there’s governance at different levels in terms of national governance and the kinds of priorities and emphasis that’s coming there. Local authorities and the relationship that a local authority has with the relevant NHS Trusts, I think DevoManc will be an interesting experiment in that regard, to see what happens when the two cultures collide in terms of recordkeeping and governance. Something that has particularly interested me in terms of governance is the relationship between rhetoric and practice, so the rhetoric in the local authorities has been very much in my experience a matter of ‘this is very private and sensitive data, and therefore there’s no possibility of sharing it because it’s too private and sensitive’, and everyone nods, except in health contexts that’s not the case. It’s private and sensitive and it’s anonymised and then gets used for research, and so therefore my impression very strongly is that the language of governance is being strategically used in order to ensure that services that feel under a lot of threat are not handing out ammunition that could mean that they’re in further trouble.

**Victoria**

I mean we’ve found in this research, there are certain…you see certain rhetorics recurring around sensitivity, privacy, data protection particularly, and I think GDPR and the increased sense of risk associated with sensitive personal data will continue to reinforce those defensive mechanisms, those barriers that are in place.

**G401**

Yes.

**Victoria**

We talked a bit about consent and permission. So there’s the permission to access the data from the data controller, I also wondered about whether or not you thought there was any necessity for consenting or gaining permission from the subjects of the data?

**G401**

I guess it would depend on what for. So I guess I’ve been enculturated within a health context where so long as the data is sufficiently aggregated and no one is identifiable that the priority is to optimise services and so therefore not seeking individual consents for aggregated anonymised data, when the purpose is in order to make a service better for its users, that that seems pretty normal to me. And I’ll admit that I’ve not really reflected very much on whether or not I think that’s appropriate. My instinct is that I think it is but this would be the first time I’ve really given that much thought. It’s just taken for granted in the health context, which of course is funny because in the social care context it’s really not.

**Victoria**

No, no, well I think…I don’t know why that might be…

**G401**

So to clarify, in a context where patient information would potentially be identifiable or where you’re dealing with case studies or something like that, then consents become much more critical, and certainly any examples written up as part of a broader project it would seem absolutely necessary to seek consent from participants. There’s been some discussion in my university about repurposing data and whether renewed consents need to be sought then. I’m personally more of a fan of tiered consent than I am of dynamic consent, I think that the participant burden for dynamic consent is…makes it not very reasonable, but again it depends on sector. Genetic data would be different to health services data which would be different to social care data in this regard, and it could be that different consenting mechanisms need to be adopted for different sources of data. The two sources of data that I’m particularly concerned with are social care data and health services data, not genetic data but in that regard I guess my instinct is that the closer it gets to the participant’s life and their story the more requirement there is for consent, whereas if it’s aggregated operational data for a service I think it would be, to my mind, a shame if the feeling of need for consents blocked that, as I think is currently…that’s my impression of the way things are operating in social care, where the feeling is that they can’t move unless they’ve consulted with service users, but it would be too much work to consult with the service users and therefore all doors are closed, seems like an unconscionable situation and not one that service users themselves would have much time for.

**Victoria**

So if you could design a system of data sharing for social care data, based on anything that you’ve learnt thus far, have you envisioned what that might look like? How a system might be established whereby social care data can be shared more widely?

**G401**

Something I’ve been struck by in recent conversations with local authorities has been that they don’t even necessarily have permission to use advanced software, even SPSS, for running analyses. They’re stuck using Excel. So therefore the sense in which the data infrastructure and the sense of caution about what’s permitted onto the system is really proving an obstacle to even operational auditing purposes and analysis of data. I guess my dream would be that when people first have their contact with social services that they have some kind of capacity to make some initial judgements about what’s going to happen to their data, including I would like to imagine the possibility of local authorities not keeping it, if that’s what the individuals want but I think it seems obvious that research is needed to find out what the views of service users are about this, but from a research point of view, which is the thing I can speak to, the possibility that local authorities can already feel comfortable that operationally that people have given consent, so that the data that they’re receiving doesn’t have this stigma attached of ‘we’re not sure whether it’s ethically shareable’ but rather our service users have already said ‘we’re happy for this to be used for research purposes’ as happens in health. So that would be one piece. Another is that, to me anyway, social care is very difficult to pull apart from other services that families might be receiving, so a dream system would be one where there’s very good integration from the ground up with education, with criminal justice, with health, and I’ve seen some really good examples of this where health data has been connected for example with education or with criminal justice data but not with social care. And then the other thing I guess I can speak to is issues around consent of children who are too young to consent or where there’s issues around capacity, where I don’t see again why the medical model can’t be put in play here, where parents can give consent for their children’s data to be used. I guess it comes to me from a rights based or a values based perspective that it seems to be unconscionable that services are being run without there being reflection on what the experiences have been of the people going through those services, and part of that reflection needs to be rigorously conducted audits or research in order to make best use of people’s experiences for future learning for the service.

**Victoria**

Yes, yes, turning then to think about the content and quality of the records and the recordkeeping. I wondered if you could say something about your experiences of the quality of the records and the data that you’ve used?

**G401**

It’s still not clear to me whether it’s unusably poor. So the two studies that I’ve done in retrospect the data was unusably poor, so certainly we were able to produce publishable outputs but it wasn’t…they’re not outputs that I feel pride in. The current work with the local authority we simply doesn’t know how that’s going to fare, my suspicion is we’ll be able to make some useful observations based on what the discussions have indicated so far, but this is essentially going to require someone within the local authority working over and above their job in order to transform operational data into something that’s usable for research, out of the goodness of his heart. And two senior managers within that local authority who are willing to go to committees, argue for this and fight against the tide. So, we will see. Critically it depends on what your research question is. So, if the question is for example David Wilkin’s questions of what are these being written for, I think they would answer that question very nicely, you know they’re being written for defensive practice, to deal with potential liability claims, that’s a question that they answer very nicely. By contrast if the question is for example how are fathers included in the process when there’s interventions with families in the child protection system? I think it would be quite uneven, so something that one of my PhD students is working on is doing analysis of mental health records where they’re free text searchable, and that offers really incredible opportunities for doing both qualitative and quantitative analyses that is limited less by the categories that the operation requires and more by the kinds of questions we might have coming at it separately. So for example we’re interested there in what factors influence diagnosis, and we don’t need to just go by the diagnostic categories we can also do free text search for related terms that might help us understand in a more fine grain what’s going on. And so therefore I guess it’s critical that both qualitative and quantitative approaches can be brought to bear. The thing I’d love to see, although it’s a total fantasy, is that research offers ways in which services can know more about the data they should be keeping, and also how to collect it, so for example service user satisfaction data might well be collected in different ways if they were to also have researchers look at it, for example factor analyse answers and see whether there’s core themes so that maybe some of it is unnecessary, reducing the service user or participant burden. That’s not something that the local authorities are set up to do, but would not be complicated piece of work necessarily, I mean that would be a potential Masters project it wouldn’t even require a PhD student.

**Victoria**

So potentially the research involvement at the point of records systems design would be valuable, in terms of making data more usable in the long term.

**G401**

For all of the parties, including the local authority.

**Victoria**

As far as you’re aware has that ever been taken into account in systems, or in something like the ICS, the Integrated Children’s System? Was there ever a sort of research element built in?

**G401**

Not to my knowledge, and I’m certain that there are people who have tried this, and maybe there is an initiative in Scotland that I don’t know and they’ve been doing brilliant work you know? I really want to highlight that I feel like a novice here and I’m still looking for the person who should have already done this.

**Victoria**

I find it really interesting as an outsider looking in, because on first encounter with social work practice I think the buzz words of moment seem to be research and evidence base and I’m interested in this apparent disconnect between that idea of building an evidence base, a research base, and the evidence itself.

**G401**

I’d place it in the context of new public management coming in in the 1990s, that organisations felt that they needed to justify their cost effectiveness in order to meet the requirements of trust from the public. Now I think there’s a number of assumptions there that are quite interesting, for example that cost effectiveness would contribute to trust, which I think was actually not correct but regardless of that, my impression is that the field of social work practice responded in part by saying well we’re cost effective and evidence-based and so therefore the pressure to become evidence-based as part of a professionalization, a further professionalization strategy in a context of scarce resources, became quite an imperative but without really the research skills or the infrastructure to support that. The result seems to me to be the proliferation of professional doctorates, normally using qualitative methods, many of which were excellent but which were not producing research that really linked up with operational data.

**Victoria**

Do you think that the advent of Social Work England will have any bearing on any of this?

**G401**

It’s hard to answer because I don’t think I’ve got enough information for a reasoned judgement, and when I’m in that situation I tend to fall back on cynicism, which isn’t necessarily the right forum for that. The thing that I’ll tell you I worry about it that the announcement and the people that they seem to be hiring and the job descriptions seem to be organised by management consultancy style discourse rather than what I would recognise as a research or even a kind of professional context of discourse. If it is a management consultancy style approach it’s not obvious to me that the construction of good recordkeeping is going to be a kind of priority, that quick wins and cost effectiveness are going to be the name of the game. But as you can see that may be unduly cynical.

**Victoria**

And there’s also the…I don’t know how they’re connected actually, is it the What Works Centre for Children’s Services? Because I was thinking about whether or not there was a role for some kind of national body that aggregates social care data in the same way that there are national bodies for health data.

**G401**

Yes, exactly, and the What Works Centre would be the logical place for that. My impression is that it’s not been funded to a point that it would have much appetite for taking that on, but that if a national initiative were developed to pursue that it would seem like a logical partner. Again it seems to be organised more around a management consultancy style discourse rather than something that’s organised by research or professional concerns. Which means that…I mean when it was first announced I thought it was going to be able to do that.

**Victoria**

Yes that’s what I thought when I first read about it, that’s what I thought it was designed to do.

**G401**

Yeah, I don’t think there’s any reason why it can’t evolve into that but I don’t think it’s going to do so organically.

**Victoria**

So from there we’ll shift and talk a little bit about ethics. We’ve touched on these subjects already. And first of all, I wanted to talk about the connection between the record and the subject, because that’s the relationship, the rights based relationship that we’re very interested in as part of the research. I wondered to what extent you thought that records’ subjects, the subjects of social care records, should be involved in research themselves, and whether or not in your experience there’s an appetite for that?

**G401**

I’d say yes and yes, but there’s some work to be done, right? I definitely think that the subject of the record is a critical stakeholder in the use of that record within practice and within research. I also think that it’s quite possible to find people who are really interested in taking that forward in order to mean that people who’ve gone through services have a better experience than they did, or have the kind of quality of experience they did. However it depends very much domain by domain, and also what the research question is. I guess the other thing I’d say here for me is that it’s not just an ethical question, the quality of the research is incomparable if people who have seen it from the inside are able to be involved in formulating the research questions. So even though personally for me it’s more of an ethical starting point, as a researcher I fully see the value…again though it is tricky. There is an infrastructure, a fairly substantial infrastructure, for PPI [patient and public involvement] within health contexts, whereas in social care contexts there’s much less support and much less infrastructure, much less knowledge in the ambient environment, and additionally more stigma attached to being involved, though…you know, I’ve not found it materially different in my experience. People who’ve had social care involvement tend…that I’ve encountered in the context of my work… have not experienced talking to a researcher about it as something that has very much bearing in relation to stigma as far as I can tell. There was much more of a sense of this was a big thing that I had to undergo and let’s have an opportunity to let people know what that was like.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I mean that’s been my experience and I recognise that it’s self-selecting to some extent, people become involved in research because they perhaps had certain types of experience as opposed to others but thus far my impression has been that everybody has been motivated to participate from a desire to have impact on future care experiences, and to improve the wellbeing of children and young people now.

**G401**

Exactly, very much so. So there’s a project that I was involved with that was looking at the experiences of mums who had had a previous child taken into permanency and were pregnant again, and the question was was it possible for services to put things in place before the pregnancy came to delivery that would mean that the mum would be able to keep the baby. And I was really impressed with the appetite of the participants in that little pilot for talking to researchers, for trying to learn about this, because they knew that what was happening here was a piece of experimental practice where normally what would have happened is they would have the baby and then it would be taken for permanency, whereas here they were attempting something different. And something that I thought was remarkable was that in fact actually… if I remember correctly… was that 80-85% of the mothers agreed subsequently with the decision regardless of whether or not… that was to…85% of the mothers whose child was not able to be kept by them agreed with the decision subsequently, because they felt that services had really tried their best and that they’d tried their best, and that was really kind of interesting and a kind of thought provoking experience for me because to lose a child in that context is a terribly traumatic thing to have to go through and nonetheless because the participants had felt that the services had done their best, and it had been done wholeheartedly, that they were on board with that, and it’s difficult for me to imagine many experiences for someone to need to consent to that would be more wild than that, and for you know, not everybody, but a very large number of the mums to consent to that and to feel that that was an appropriate decision gave me a sense of the faith that if things appear to be meaningful and good intentioned that there’s an appetite for contributing.

**Victoria**

Thinking about ethics processes and procedures, we’ve talked about the challenge of gaining permission or access to the records from the data controller, some of which uses the language of ethics as a way of putting up barriers…

**G401**

Yeah.

**Victoria**

I wondered whether or not you had thoughts about the implications of academic ethics processes for this kind of data, and whether or not there were any challenges associated with that?

**G401**

Yes, interesting, so I spent three years I think as the research ethics lead in the social work department I was in and that was a university that had a very defensive ethics procedure. The system really didn’t trust researchers so essentially you needed to write 50 plus pages of application, it was really inhibitive, and it was on the assumption that things will go wrong and the system needs to cover its back, but people persevered. So for example I was pleased that I was able to support someone who wanted to do ethnographic work following social workers into parent’s homes, within the child protection process, and to do a doctorate looking at that. I think ethnographic work is particularly interesting in that regard, because consents are not easy to sort out because you’re seeing all kinds of people, for example at a family case conference or something like that, and to understand that in ethnographic work you don’t necessarily need consent from everybody, and to be able to navigate that and work out ways of doing that. Someone that may be worth talking to if you’re interested in that would be Harry Ferguson…

**Victoria**

His name has come up already, yeah.

**G401**

Yes, fine, and he’s a lovely man as well so good to talk to. So that’s on the one side, and then when I moved into a health context the processes are just zappy you know, so long as you’re not working with live human subjects and you’re just analysing routine data you can move very quickly. At the point at which you’re dealing with anything to do with humans it’s different and there’s a whole rigmarole, extraordinary amounts of rigmarole around HRAs [Health Research Authority] and IRAS [Integrated Research Application System] and the blockage when it seems to be anything that could be mistaken for a biomedical trial, which is most things, but at the point at which it’s just analysing routine data, which is the thing I’m particularly interested in at the moment, actually I’ve been surprised in the health context by how fast you can go. So we’re thinking of putting this local authority application in actually through the health REC [Research Ethics Committee] and are reasonably optimistic that that needn’t take too long. I guess a critical reflection that I had was a sense that the university research ethics process at my previous institution was not about research ethics, it was about risk management, and that therefore it produced quite a sense of confusion as to… if it was genuinely a risk assessment then it should have been written as a risk assessment and framed as such and it could have been faster, whereas if it was genuinely about research ethics then it needed to have been about research ethics and how to deal sensitively with participants. In being framed as a research ethics application but ultimately actually being a risk application, it meant that the incoherence resulted in just longer and longer forms and more and more defensive forms of practice because you can never adequately answer a risk assessment with an ethics application. These seem to be more clearly distinguished within a health context, but there’s this issue of everything being mistaken for a biomedical trial, which is a different problem.

**Victoria**

Thank you, that’s really interesting. We’ve been talking a lot during this project about the legislative landscape for social care records, which is very fragmented, both in terms of what should be created, what should be retained and for how long and then how it should be managed. At the moment as you may know access to this kind of data for the subject is governed by data protection legislation and I have been led to believe by a number of authorities that access for research could be managed through either data protection or Freedom of Information legislation, and I just wondered if you had any thoughts about the legislative context and whether or not there could be meaningful legislative change that would help to balance the rights of different people to this kind of information.

**G401**

I guess I can’t speak to much of that because I don’t think that I’ve got the expertise, either as a policy maker or someone who has specialised in legislative aspects or as a service user directly, but one thing I can speak to is the sense that the local authorities seem to be operating within a context where crisis feels ordinary and as a consequence their relationship with records is I think shaped by that sense of permanent crisis, that they feel that they need to do whatever it takes to hold off threat, and if there’s new legislation coming in or things like that they need to insulate themselves against getting it wrong, without very much eye to what else there can be in life besides getting it wrong, and that my fantasy would be a situation where local authorities have some spare imagination to think about what else records can be for them, and that would have some input into future legislation and policy in this area. My impression is that not only do the stakeholders for this material have little relationship with one another, they also have few fora in which they could have a relationship with one another, and that as a consequence there’s very few occasions when any of them get stimulated into generating much discourse. So, for example, whereas there is a lot of discussions on social media about health records I wouldn’t say that I’ve seen very much in relation to social care, and indeed when the media is discussing what’s happening to health records again social care is only turning up insofar as ‘health and social care’ is a phrase. And so therefore I think something that I’d love to see is the opportunity for the different stakeholders to have a chance to talk to one another, to generate opportunities for thoughtfulness around this, it’s not necessarily that I think there is a single right solution but at the moment it seems to me sad and kind of unconscionable that it’s not being thought about, except insofar as how to avoid threat.

**Victoria**

Thank you, that seems like a good note to end on. Do you have any final thoughts you want to add? [G401 indicates no.] No. Well thank you so much, I’ll stop recording.

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held on 20th August 2018 between G402 and Victoria Hoyle, at the Blue Moon Café, Sheffield.

BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW

**Victoria**

So, if you want to start by just recapping for me your field of specialism and the ways in which you’ve used child social care records in your research.

**G402**

Alright, so it mainly relates to my PhD thesis on so-called ‘Problem Families’, which is sort of a broad elastic term used by social workers, welfare workers, other professionals from the 1940s to 1970s, and often children would be in need or at risk or needing care within these families. So the types of records relates to those submitted primarily to the Brentwood rehabilitation centre in Marple when it was open, but these can vary from the sort of changes in recordkeeping practice anyway by sort of social workers, welfare professionals, from sort of a curated and tailored submission by public health authorities, welfare departments which were those responsible mainly for homeless families, or children’s departments, but also from a raft of voluntary organisations. But mainly because of the geography of the centre, where it is and the types of referrals they took, it’s mainly from the north west of England, so the types of voluntary organisations that presented are mainly from Liverpool, Manchester, sort of rural Lancashire and Cheshire as well. But within that there are records of mainly families but some children who were taken into care during that period of time.

**Victoria**

And what was the period that was covered?

**G402**

So the term was used from the 1940s to the 1970s, but the thesis covers when Brentwood was taking so-called ‘Problem Families’ so from 1943 until 1970, so it’s basically the period before the creation of modern social service departments, and that’s quite important I think in terms of recordkeeping. I have looked at other records surrounding those, sort of some related materials, but that’s the sort of main corpus of information that I had to work with.

**Victoria**

So the Brentwood records themselves, could you just describe where they’re held and sort of their custodial histories, how they have come to be available for research?

**G402**

So Brentwood was run by an organisation called the Community Council of Lancashire and that was the parent organisation based in Manchester, and they’re now based in Preston, and it’s their material that was deposited when a new director took over in the early 2000s, and they deposited material that was kept in their cellar, so both the organisation’s administrative records but also this huge volume of case files. But the property in question it’s sort of an old Victorian… a huge sort of villa, a terraced one, and the conditions meant that about half the records survived, so physically a lot was deteriorated by mould and decay. And then they were deposited in the early 2000s at Lancashire Archives… I think then… it was Preston Record Office it might have been called, it doesn’t matter…the overwhelming majority of the records were transferred then, but when I went to Community Futures – so my PhD was a collaborative doctoral award with them, through the Economic and Social Research Council – I looked through a lot of boxed material they had in their cellar and there were more case records there, so I then ended up deposited about 300 I think, 200-300 something like that, records at the end of the PhD thesis, so in 2016, 2017, and it was through the collaborative doctoral award that I was accessing these in the first place, the reason that I didn’t have to negotiate any kind of access is that the PhD was advertised as using these records and that was the way in which the sort of application for funding had always been laid out.

**Victoria**

And how did that funding bid come about? Had people used these records previously or was this entirely new territory?

**G402**

So it relates to my doctoral supervisor, [who] wrote an article in 2007 or 2008 about Brentwood in *Twentieth Century British History* and he used a very small number of case files in order to sort of write this article about the history of the centre - none of which are anonymised by the way, it’s that thing we were talking about earlier - and he recognised I think in terms of addressing the idea of the ‘Problem Family’ it’s a huge resource, so he saw the project and it sort of went by the wayside, came and went, and then I saw this advertised PhD 2012, 2013, and I started in 2013, and so it was done sort of as an existing concept between my supervisor and the head of Community Futures, sort of based on this existing consent to use these records to try and I think do it a bit more comprehensively, or at least more detailed. And I think it’s only when I started looking at them that I did it a bit more comprehensively than perhaps I anticipated.

**Victoria**

And in addition to the Brentwood records you’ve used resources from other archives. Were any of those also case records relating to individuals or records that had personal data in them?

**G402**

Yeah, overwhelmingly, that’s pretty much the majority of what I used. So Brentwood was a rehabilitation centre for these so-called ‘Problem Families’ but it was the first of many. There was one in York, that moved from Harrogate into York which was run by Quakers, an organisation kept at Leeds University their records now; the Salvation Army ran one in Plymouth; the Middlemore Emigration Homes Trust ran one in Birmingham; and the Frimhurst Home for Mothers was run in Surrey, at the time by sort several organisations but now the records are owned by ATD Fourth World, sort of a voluntary organisation. There is one in Scotland as well, the St. Mary’s Mothercraft Centre in Dundee, but I’ve not tracked any records down for it, I’ve been in contact with the university archivist, the city archivist, I can’t find anything else. But none of them had as comprehensive a record. For Birmingham for example, only a handful of case files survived literally there were 3 or 4. For Frimhurst the one in Surrey I accessed all the surviving ones that they had, but again it was very hit and miss about which ones survived and I had no clear way of seeing what had survived in the way that I had elsewhere. Despite the fact that you know that 200 mothers went there from the Salvation Army, the Mayflower home, the information was very very spartan and not comprehensive in terms of listing every single mother that went. So no one had as good or survival of records as good as Brentwood. But they’re all the voluntary centres, so I also then looked at records from sponsoring authorities, so either local authorities Children’s Services, again the whole range of things from voluntary organisations who were sending mothers to these centres, and it’s not always the case that the records would match, there were different kinds of records that survived, but I did that for as many as I could find that still existed and it was…the ones that I used were largely determined by what survived basically.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and so you mentioned then about finding them. How did you go about locating these kinds of records? Brentwood obviously you knew about at the outset, but the others?

**G402**

Trial and error I would say. I used Archives Hub as was then to try and identify some, but again just searching for keywords, by the names of the Centres, if you put in the sort of term ‘Problem Family’ you don’t get as many records that relate to problem families so once you start unearthing case files you sort of get an idea of the kinds of terminology used at the time and how they shape the survival of records, and also you know where in local authorities that material might be kept, so if you can’t access it by searching for it you can find it by the layer of the collection. A lot of it was by accident. So Frimhurst for example, their records have never been deposited, they’re not in a record office, the only way I knew about them was by contacting the organisation directly because it’s actually still going, for the family rehabilitation centre. The ones in Birmingham if I remember off the top of my head but I think again it was through Archives Hub. The Salvation Army I ended up contacting the archivist. So I knew these centres existed because a lot of the corresponding material is kept within the Brentwood archive, back then they were sort of aligning themselves with the work of others and so it was only by looking into the substance of files that I then knew there were corresponding things that existed before trying to search for other surviving material. The National Archives were quite…once you get your head around the way in which they sort of accession information to do with the sort of the Home Office Children’s Department, the Ministry of Health will have inspection files for different centres from different moments in time, not always labelled as such but it is, and so knowing that they exist as well and sort of the correspondence files between the respective Ministries and the different organisations in question. So there are all layers of sort of bureaucracy that surround it that you get only by digging into them and then sort of knowing where to look and what they are from what survives.

**Victoria**

So in order to find the records you have to build up quite a kind of broad picture of the context, kind of follow the administrative structures of provision?

**G402**

I think particularly before 1970, but that’s something I only learned sort of by accident really, is that this was a time when social work and social services were being professionalised, it wasn’t sort of an event it took a long period of time, so some authorities, some record offices, are better than others in how that sort of has taken place and the kind of coding of the language that was used at the time and the ways in which it was sort of framed has a very strong influence on that, and the idea that records are sort of legislatively laid out is certainly not the case, often it’s sort of individual officials or authorities pursuing these things and then determining what they do and how they do it, sharing that information with other authorities and people in the know, sort of constructing by the act of doing.

**Victoria**

So having found the records, in terms of the processes for accessing them, I’m assuming that you encountered some quite different access protocols in different places. Are you able to talk a little bit about those?

**G402**

Yeah, yeah, I mean I would say the differences were enormous, that some records, even if they contained personal information, something as simple as sort of a letter of recommendation from my supervisor or the university would be enough to have pretty much total access. I mean again they were often conditionally done within letters so I’d have to sign a disclosure agreement to say I wouldn’t name anyone or that I would have to run anything that I would publish by the depositing authority in question, so sometimes it was very very straightforward. Other times…so with a lot of the voluntary organisations I had to apply to the Chief Executive, direct to the Board of Trustees, for permission to use them, but again that process it varied. Some people would rubber stamp it and basically not know what kinds of things existed, but others would have a very strong sense of their involvement or their image shall we say in what they would and wouldn’t allow access to. In other cases it varied by collection. So for example in Birmingham accessing Middlemore Emigration Homes Trust, which is mainly to do with child migration, it was Birmingham Children’s Services Adoption department that sort of had to give the approval for that. I mean they didn’t give too much scrutiny in the original application but they said anything that goes to be published has to sort of be run by them and they’ve been very good in that process. But their local authority records were dealt with and handled differently, and my request to view them was looked at differently. So, it’s not something that I knew how to do quite frankly, I sort of learned by doing and asking people, sort of getting guidance from them. So I’m talking about the ones that were successful, I’ve had a lot of unsuccessful ones as well where people…so there’s a Children’s Services now that has been embroiled in a number of child deaths very recently when I started my research and my request was sort of out and out refused, they said no you can’t have access to that information at all and no matter whether I dress it up as, you know, I’ve got respectable credentials please permit me access versus these are my legal rights, neither route yielded much, so there’s a considerable divergence.

**Victoria**

So generally you were making the request under the researcher exemption of the Data Protection Act?

**G402**

By and large yeah.

**Victoria**

So I’m interested in this last example that you’ve given where there was a refusal, did they respond to that with a legal basis? So did they sort of cite an exemption under data protection? Or did they just…?

**G402**

Off the top of my head I can’t recall entirely, as far as I remember the process at no point was sort of section 33 or the information act cited in any sort of way. The idea was that…I think they used the 100 year rule, I might be wrong, it’s been a long time since I looked at the correspondence, but basically they said I couldn’t have access because of that, regardless of my intentions or not, but then the issue was that the archive in question was sort of the…those responsible for holding the material, they basically deferred any kind of involvement at all, they wouldn’t sort of say this is the reason you can’t access the material, it was down to the Director of Children’s Services in question to determine whether I had access or not, so they kind of disowned that extent of involvement.

**Victoria**

Did you find that there was any difference between the access regimes when you were going through a Children’s Services department or you know a charitable organisation versus an archival repository like a County Record Office?

**G402**

I think so, yeah, I mean I don’t think I know so, I’d say definitely. So the example in question, the one where I got…the county authority was [Cumbria], where it was [Poppy Worthington] who died and they were very keen to keep a stamp on that, and at the same time I was trying to access material from [Rochdale], and this was a time when the Jimmy Saville scandal was starting to really break, and so I think there was a response from their point of view to close that down because of the sort of idea of publicity around the kinds of things that I was interested in. Whereas a lot of county or city authority record offices I think because they’re used to having researchers through in different ways…but that said if it was a voluntary organisation’s deposit they would still again defer responsibility and say they have the final call, but there was an ambiguity because the Birmingham example, Middlemore, they don’t exist anymore, so that’s why it’s then sort of been passed on to the adoption service, whereas for others that still exist, a lot of organisations that still exist, they have some kind of say over it basically. That’s not always the case though, because I’ve used the records of what was then the charitable organisation the Society of Family Welfare Association, now called Family Action. They’ve deposited a considerable volume of their material in the London Metropolitan Archives and at no stage during that process did I have to get in touch with Family Action. I did separately through sort of another research involvement but that whole process I accessed their organisational materials just through the archive in question.

**Victoria**

Interesting. And when the records arrived to look at did you find there had been a lot of archival intervention prior to you looking at them, in terms of cataloguing, sampling, organising etc?

**G402**

It depends on what it was, some.

**Victoria**

So it’s very variable?

**G402**

Hugely variable. So for example the Salvation Army, the Mayflower one, that was just in a book, it just had admissions to every single home that they had, so you can go through 50, 60 pages of this book and then find one entry for the home that you’re looking for in question and you go through all these other ones in the interim, and that’s not complete either, I’ve sort of said before, there are sort of omissions, you can tell by the sort of admission numbers that they were given that there are those that aren’t there. In the case of the Middlemore home in Birmingham, Crowley House, is that they’d I think, along with the archives taken… well I don’t think I know, they’d taken, because of the way in which they were accessioned, just a handful of case files. But again that was all sort of no information as far as I could tell had been sort of removed from that, because the sort of correspondence and the application files all gelled quite nicely so there’d been no sifting within the file, but the actual extent of the files had been sort of heavily redacted or destroyed basically. As to whether it was the archive that was doing that or the organisation before they deposited it it’s very hard to tell. Brentwood again…which is why it’s such a useful source, was the exception that proves the rule, is that apart from taking in these boxes and boxes of case files, rows of case files, a lot of them had never been looked at, because a lot of them are still in sort of sealed brown envelopes or bundles of them, and I had to break twine and things to get in to them, so they’d taken I think the files in, accessioned them on the basis of the information they’d got from the organisation and then no one had really looked at them subsequently. In other instances I sort of…classic Derrida Archive Fever…that it was sort of by happenstance that when I was in Bury Archives looking at a load of material for ‘problem families’ there was a volunteer in who was cataloguing a box of stuff and they just open this box that said ‘problem families’ on top and there lo and behold was a whole host of material that’s not on the catalogue, the archivist didn’t know about, which was ‘discovered’ in inverted commas while I was there. So there are all these different sorts of routes and with that the archivist quite sensibly didn’t sort of say here you are, they looked through it and saw what it was and then I had to sign an agreement as a result of that, so the survival of the records and the involvement of archivists is very very variable. Because it’s also about the presence of an absence, so for example I was very interested in the sort of corresponding information of local authorities, so Children’s Services, the welfare services, public health departments, they obviously at some stage did hold files on these families but they sort of aren’t there, everywhere. So that’s why I had to rely very heavily on the Brentwood and on the voluntary organisations, because the local authority ones had been destroyed, almost en masse before 1970.

**Victoria**

That’s very interesting and that would reflect what was sort of standard retention wisdom of the time. So of the records that you saw were any ever redacted or any omissions made, as far as you can be aware, in what you were presented with?

**G402**

The only body that has done is The National Archives, but I’ve never had a conditional access agreement, everything that I’ve had to view at the National Archives has been under Freedom of Information, so they’ve obviously redacted the sort of third party details. And in the case of The National Archives if I’ve ever wanted to access this sort of information I’ve always been directed to contact the depositing department in question, so in the case of children’s department records it would be the Home Office but the same applies for the Department of Education and Ministry of Health. So they’ve always again sort of kept me at arms-length and said they’re the depositor, they’re responsible for them, contact them. Everywhere else the information I’ve been presented with has been what has survived.

**Victoria**

Yeah, that’s really interesting because another researcher that I’ve spoken with has talked about The National Archives not having a Data Protection exemption route for researchers and using Freedom of Information as the default.

**G402**

Yes that’s absolutely been my experience as well.

**Victoria**

So have you used Freedom of Information anywhere else, or just with The National Archives?

**G402**

Just with The National Archives. Mainly because the other routes have always been open, so apart from the couple of authorities I mentioned where I got a blanket refusal I don’t think…well my feeling was that if I used Freedom of Information that I wouldn’t get any of the kind of details that I would want or be interested in from a historical point of view, that it would just be sort of all redacted, so it wasn’t worthwhile pursuing. Whereas with the National Archives that is the only route that I had, so that’s the only way I could pursue it really.

**Victoria**

Yeah. In terms of other limitations placed on you, were there any restrictions in terms of what you could do with the records, in terms of copying…I know you’ve mentioned about publication and sometimes having to get permission, but in terms of copying and retaining information from the records, were there any restrictions?

**G402**

Yeah, always, so the only place that I’ve been allowed but I never did, mainly because of the sort of personal and university ethical guidance, only one place allowed me to photograph these kinds of records, everywhere else you were allowed to take notes on them. It’s hard to say but a lot, I can’t give a figure to it, but a lot would then ask to see your notes and scrutinise them. But the extent to which they’re providing scrutiny, bearing in mind that if I’m going to an archive regularly I’ll be doing 10-15000 words a day, every day for like two or three weeks, that the actual degree of scrutiny given to those I think is…only can be limited and usually that’s the end of the day when everyone’s packing up and no one’s asked me to sort of send them separately with that. But most places will allow me to take notes with a laptop, I only had one place where I had to do it with paper and pencil, but that was not really that much of an impediment because of the quality of the material, and I only had one or two – off the top of my head – authorities that asked me to… at the point of accessing information…to anonymise details, most places would say do it in publication or when it goes out, but one or two said at source you have to do it, which is frustrating and difficult from my point of view because it was mainly about record linkages, so I had different multi-problem families who by definition have contact with many agencies, so I often had to sort of internally circumvent that or try to to make most use of them by sort of knowing where they linked, but obviously I had to also adhere to their rules because that’s what I sort of signed away to do.

**Victoria**

That’s interesting, so to facilitate your particular research being able to have access to and also manipulate the personal data – the names and identities of individuals – was key?

**G402**

Integral. So by definition a ‘problem family’ is one known to many authorities, that’s how it’s sort of had this elastic term, sort of how useful it was is up for debate, but it basically meant knowing that the family is in contact with lots of different organisations and that the social workers around this family in question were also in contact with one another, so it’s the way in which they then produce the picture of the family as a problem and why they were put as a problem too, because they were spending a lot of time there, they were spending a lot of meetings around them, and it was that bureaucratic process which is part of it, so this is an issue in terms of manufacturing the case files, because I only know they’re ‘problem families’ because we have these huge reams of information relating to these families, but the only way I can then reassemble that picture is by looking at all the organisations that are involved with them, but because local authorities are destroying theirs and not all of them survive is that it’s a very fragmentary picture, yet with the Brentwood case files a lot of the later ones in particular anyway straight away you’re given sort of local authorities information all sort of sent across, so then you can really have a feel of that’s why they’re perceived to be a problem family, so in the methodological way that I’m assembling this, ‘I need’ is the wrong word but I would like very strongly to have access to those kind of details. Because it’s not just the children, the mothers, the families in question I’m interested in, it’s the social workers, the decision making processes around them.

**Victoria**

And in the course of your research, did you ever seek consent from anyone other than the organisations or creators of the records, for example the subjects of the records themselves?

**G402**

No, blanket no, however problematic that is. Hugely. You know, because I’m writing about people…because it’s recent history the vast majority I would say of at least the children of the mothers in question are probably still alive, you know.

**Victoria**

So is there anything that you would change about the access procedures that you experienced?

**G402**

From an academic point of view? I’d straight up say something about The National Archives, that that because it was the most problematic as an organisation that is trying to hand off these kinds of issues… The fact that there’s no consistency is the biggest problem, there’s no sort of central guidance, that I think is mainly determined by case by case of the point of view of the archivists, they’re sort of responding to… And also the fact that they can move to a different job or a different area so a new archivist comes in and doesn’t know what’s happened before and I never had an experience where an archivist moved and I was then denied access but that could quite possibly happen because there’s no guidance or sort of information around that. I also think most of the local authorities, most of the central government departments, the voluntary organisations in question are risk averse, and don’t know what’s in the materials, I think it’s sort of a blanket…particularly in the light of most recent scandals…a blanket refusal is sort of…if you don’t know or are unsure is the easiest path to adopt. So in terms of access I think the provisions of Section 33 of the 1998 Act are positive in trying to allow for some kind of access to material that is otherwise closed confidential or not accessible to the general public, but the way in which its loosely defined, loosely understood, broadly interpreted, lacking some kind of guidance document, lacking legislative backing…beyond that it’s 20 years old now. I think that’s a problem. I also think that universities perhaps don’t know much about it, particularly historians, so I don’t know if you’re going to come on to it later but…

**Victoria**

Feel free to talk about it now.

**G402**

My experience of ethics was limited, that within the history department there wasn’t a feeling that it was something that had been pursued as an issue before, my supervisor had published the whole detailed information about these people without any sort of view from the university or from Community Futures, there were no checks at all. So there was a bit of uncertainty there and the person I ended up going through, it sort of…it was somebody in the sociology department that had some kind of experience with this and a lot of that was driven by my willingness, in terms of publication, or unwillingness to mention certain things, so for example there is a very small town in a part of Cumbria where a number of families came from and even if I put in people’s individual initials in case files you can clearly tell who these people are and so I took the decision sort of in informal conversation not to include that because you would very clearly tell what’s going on, it’s not fair to those people in question, whereas otherwise saying a family from Liverpool or something like that there are ways of masking that information. But the lack of a robust ethical procedure within the department and within the Faculty generally in understanding those I’d say is quite worrying, especially because I didn’t come from a background as an undergraduate or postgraduate of dealing with that kind of material. It was something that I learned by doing basically, which is you know good in many respects but in terms of trying to have something that’s robust it’s lesser.

**Victoria**

So I know you did go through your research ethics committee. At what point did that happen?

**G402**

Very late on. So, the issue was that they were asking for lists of things that I would like to use right in the beginning, weeks into the PhD, but apart from Brentwood I didn’t know because I only discovered once I sort of went through…so it wasn’t until quite late on, the last…my third year that I got ethical approval to do things that I’d already done. That wasn’t sort of an accident per se, that had come out as an informal discussion with the Faculty because I was following my nose in terms of these leads but also because it was history and there was an assumption I think that the relevant legislation within archives would dictate my access to them anyway, so it’s sort of a self-reliance that there is a framework in place anyway, and if I tried to access this it would safeguard itself. That’s why sort of the case in question of the small village only came up in discussion at the end when I was thinking about using it rather than sort of a data collection gathering process.

**Victoria**

So when you worked through the ethics process, presumably at that point you then had to think about issues around anonymity and redaction that perhaps you’d been thinking about all the way through but not formalised. So, could you talk a bit more about the decisions you made about anonymity in particular. I know you’ve mentioned using initials rather than full names but it would just be helpful to understand a little bit more about the justifications for the decisions that you made.

**G402**

So the…it was trying to do two things, it was trying to make it so that if someone in 15, 20, 100 years time wants to then check the work that I’ve done they can and make it historically reliable, that they could go find the information that I would sort of then put into the thesis, basically pointing to the files themselves. In the vast majority of the material that I then sort of looked at most of the files in question had a case file number so that was a convenient way of sort of bracketing, not all of them did and so it was a way of trying to have some kind of identifier so there is some means of doing it. I think using pseudonyms would have been much more problematic in terms of authenticity because it loses key aspects of people’s individual identity, so for example most of the families came from the north west of England, an awful lot of Irish migration, as I sort of talk about in my thesis there’s a lot of families that were the children of European workers, a scheme of sort of patriation from the Second World War, of people in displacement camps, and I could make up sort of slightly patronising perhaps racist surnames in lieu as pseudonyms but it wouldn’t do justice I think to it. So it makes it less personal and relatable and that’s something that I had sort of a discussion with, not my academic colleagues but other people I sort of know within sort of social services and social care, that you lose a sense of emotional identity and attachment with someone which is often important in this kind of understanding, but equally there was a need to do that. I used initials rather than any other way was that it was mainly across these different…I mean some records they only used initials, or only used surnames so that was less of an immediate concern, but in other ways it was…particularly in the Brentwood case files, you know, there was one box, I can’t remember…maybe H’s or something, or S’s, where hundreds of people had exactly the same so by corresponding initials with the case file number that allowed sort of a correlation with the two. So it is about protecting the people in question, because that’s what I didn’t want, I didn’t want anyone who’d been to Brentwood or been identified by social services during the period to sort of open it up and go ‘oh, great’ and find anything about themselves or about their neighbours in a very immediate way. But I didn’t do that with the social workers in question, so I’ve identified - and I’ve sort of been quite upfront about this at the beginning - that I was interested in their decision making processes, so although I’ve anonymised the families concerned, the so-called ‘problem families’, the children and the wider family, I haven’t anonymised the social workers because part of my interest was looking at cases from the 1940s and 1960s with the same social worker and seeing how things are changing and things like that so I haven’t been as protective of them, but equally they’re the ones that were providing, sort of doing the actions so I didn’t feel the same need. Because they had to be accountable for what they did in many respects in the same way that organisations look at it now, so it was trying to maintain that kind of anonymity, and as I sort of said corresponding the initials then with the places, so I would never – particularly sort of rural Lancashire – name the small village where they came from, it would be ‘a village outside of Wigan’ or wherever because that way it was sort of historical enough in terms of time, space and place but you know with a distance at the same time.

**Victoria**

That’s really interesting, because it strikes me as a very different approach to anonymity to what might be used in social science research itself, because as you said there are requirements of historical method in terms of being able to audit where you’ve been and exactly the sources that you’ve used that make true anonymity very difficult.

**G402**

Yes

**Victoria**

And I hadn’t really considered that before, that the historical method itself is resistant to anonymity in some ways.

**G402**

Yeah, I think that’s very true, I think because the idea is to be not as transparent as possible, that’s the wrong word, but as comprehensive as possible maybe, to provide all these kind of details that in 100 years time I think people will have no qualms about it in the same way that you can write about early modern England and it sort of obviously identifies, but the fact that as I said before a lot of children of these mothers let alone the mother’s themselves are still alive, it would be unfair to them – and that’s where the sort of legislative framework sort of kicks in – it would be unfair to write about them as subjects of historical research in that sense.

**Victoria**

You’ve mentioned before we started recording that you have had some contact from people who had contact with Brentwood or who had been at Brentwood and I just wondered if you could talk a bit about that contact and whether or not it impacted on your research?

**G402**

It’s very very difficult. So when I first started my research there’s a Marple - where Brentwood was based - a local history forum and I posted a message on an existing thread related to Brentwood, where a lot of people who’d been to Brentwood, mainly as children rather than mothers, although one or two as mothers did, posted messages about their experiences there or photographs and I obviously wanted to try and tap into that, sort of trying to do justice to that side of the historical record because basically I was doing a quote unquote classical historical PhD reading into these historical sources what was going on whereas you know speaking to people involved I thought day one, week one would be a great thing to do to try and balance that narrative. But that didn’t get much of a response, mercifully. I at the end of my thesis did a talk to Marple local historical society about Brentwood and at this talk former staff members came and a few people who’d been there as children came, and at a point in the talk I didn’t sort of identify, because it was more of a sort of broader history than of people in question, but I then spoke to everyone afterwards, since, and interviewed them separately, and that was very very difficult because obviously they wanted to know more about their own experiences, their own mothers experience, but not everyone’s case file existed because it is very sort of uneven, and those that did can be quite scant versus some that are quite detailed, and a lot of people asked about the kinds of information and I sort of I pointed them in the general direction, you know, either the case file did or didn’t exist and that it might not be worthwhile seeing or it might be from their point of view because if they did a subject access request a lot of it would be blanked out because it doesn’t concern them directly, but that said in discussions there was sort of of the case files that did exist and the people that were still there there was an incredible power imbalance, in sort of conducting an interview, which I felt and still feel incredibly uncomfortable with because I would know perhaps the reason why their mother had been sent and they might know or might not know, or they might know and might not want to let me know, and it’s a very difficult thing to navigate, and also that basically you went to Brentwood, you were labelled a ‘problem family’ and you went to Brentwood because your family was in poverty, materially difficult in the era of ‘never having it so good’ and the idea that Brentwood was a time or a holiday for rest and relaxation for them and the kids in the clean countryside was very dominant, so nostalgic, seen as a shining moment amongst a lot of other issues but equally there was view that people who knew and had more of a sense that it was for so-called ‘problem families’ said ‘my mother wasn’t one, but everybody else there was’ or ‘our case was different’, and there is some substance to a lot of that in the way that I’ve argued in my thesis, that it was uncertain, this sort of grey area, but it had enormous problems in the sense that there’s one family in particular who I’ve not spoken in quite the same way that I’ve interviewed…it’s because they’ve been in touch because they went back a few times sort of during the 1950s and 1970s, before it closed, and the reason that they were sent or that the family as a whole was sent was significant problems with abuse, and I wasn’t at all comfortable, competent or sure about how to navigate that process in the slightest.

**Victoria**

It puts a very different kind of pressure on you as a researcher, to feel like you’re stood kind of in the middle between the record of something like abuse and the subjects of that record.

**G402**

Yes, yeah absolutely.

**Victoria**

And did you ever feel at any point that there was any tension between you and the former residents of Brentwood because you had this kind of privileged access to information about them?

**G402**

Yeah, I’d say definitely, in one or two individuals in particularly definitely that’s been the case, sort of, because I think they’re expecting either more from me or to have this kind of disclosure, I think they’re a bit…what’s the word, obstructive isn’t the word, they’re frustrated, they’re trying to recapture this moment and all of a sudden they’ve found someone who knows about it, this great moment in their lives, but equally it wasn’t as straightforward as going here we here, *Who do you think you are*, and opening it back up, because it’s incredibly difficult. I mean not every case by a margin is but I think often it’s probably I suspect not coincidental that those who had the most difficult sort of experiences in Brentwood repeatedly, went back repeatedly, were the ones who got in touch.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and do you know had any of them previously accessed their Brentwood records?

G402

No, no, and as far as I know no one has since. I think the prospect of doing so, as in the sort of administrative difficulties, means that people I think were quite put off, because it was always the mother who was sent rather than the children in question, so I think they would be quite…or the image that I perhaps presented to them, knowing these sort of case files would just be sort of the amount of information that would be redacted would be beyond use, from their point of view in trying to understand their own past.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I mean one of the things that we’ve looked at a lot with the care leavers, I mean everyone that we’ve spoken to has been in care rather than a child in need or had contact with social services, but one of the things that they highlight as…you know, it creates an enormous amount of tension between the individual and an authority, and also the individual internally, around what information they have a right to versus what information is redacted or omitted from their record. And in this particular case because they’re not the subject of the record necessarily it would be very dependent on the approach that was taken by the record holder.

**G402**

Yeah, I can understand that.

**Victoria**

Ok, so you’ve used the term ‘problem families’ and obviously that’s a potentially contentious designation, so I just want to talk a bit about the content of the records themselves, and their potentials and limitations. What’s your assessment of the quality of this kind of record?

**G402**

I’d say narrow and enormous. It’s narrow in the sense that it is an organisation at a particular moment in time, taking in a very relatively small number of families who are identified nationally within the kind of policy structures that were responsible for referring families, a tiny tiny number of families. So there was a study done by the Eugenics Society, that great bastion of truth, in the early…in the early 1950s, late 1940s, trying to quantify the problem of the ‘problem family’ and one of the people involved suggested there were about 80,000 families, hit and miss bearing in mind the sort of policy structures put in place to identify these families, to register them, to record them, and the sort of turnover you have with families that are sort of being rehabilitated and those that aren’t, that’s probably not an inaccurate overall…changing over time…but number of families and so in Brentwood I’ve only got in a year maybe 100 of that number, so it’s not representative in sort of the classic social science sense but it’s indicative of what’s going on and that’s why within my thesis I tried at all opportunities to link the file record in question to the sort of bureaucratic administrative structures that put it there, both at sort of a local authority level but also how local authorities actually were shaped by the Ministry, different ministries of central government and so you know it’s in this bigger frame and that’s always been my lens of analysis, so in that sense the individual record in question is of limited value if you just went to look at it as a narrow corpus of information but if you put it in its proper context, classic historians answer right? But put it in its context then it has some value, cos it is a worry of mine if I’m honest that you get stuff like ESRC Secondary Data Analysis where they say here you don’t need to do any more research or collect more things because we already have it and just look at it in isolation, and you would end up with a very skewed image of what you’re trying to study. So in that sense it’s narrow but I think it has enormous prospects for trying to understand the past in a big way, I know this is again a sort of cliché but for me reading through the files of you know people’s highs and lows, the emotions of growing up basically, and living their lives, both the sort of mothers, the children, the fathers, the different staff, the different social workers who in between the sort of referral reports are talking about their holidays and things like that, you just get a window into a moment in time, but you only construct it by looking at everything, which is not the most time useful way of doing things but to try and do it justice that’s the way I sort of pursued, so…I think it’s more… valuable is the wrong word but informative than sort of a narrow focus just on care, because care…I mean, who is admitted to care and who isn’t admitted to care is how long is a piece of string in many respects, and that’s something that really comes out of looking at ‘problem families’ is the kind of superstructure that runs around people who were admitted to care, and often you find mothers sort of referred to Brentwood either because the children had been received into care or because they’d been through proceedings and they weren’t, or they were prosecuted for child neglect and they were found guilty or innocent, so everyone, all these kinds of experiences go there, and to view care as sort of a discreet absolute category I think is problematic, because it exists within a spectrum of supervision and intervention within social welfare services. But again that’s only something that I’ve really got to grips with by looking beyond the confines of the case file and trying to understand that. I think it’s also got a lot of value in trying to piece together people’s lives who perhaps, if they’re in and out of these sort of care systems or supervision, is missing, so in a lot of the later files particularly sort of late 50s and 60s there’s like…there’s photographs, there’s mementos, there’s news clippings, there’s letters and stuff, of times they’ve been in holiday or sat playing, although the whole sort of view is that it’s sort of abuse and misery and poverty and things like that within the sort of rich texture of what’s going on that’s not the case at all, and I’ve seen holiday snaps of people that, you know, they’ve probably not seen them themselves and in that sense there’s a very – within this bigger picture – there’s a very personal story, but I only know it’s there because I’ve gone through it. I mean, you wouldn’t have any sense of that by looking at the archival listing or the catalogue. It’s difficult, it’s fragmented.

**Victoria**

I’m really interested in that idea that the records know things about people that the people don’t even know about themselves.

**G402**

Yeah erm [hestitates] when you put it like that it sounds a bit…patronising in a way, this kind of because it’s the record its authoritative, I mean I think one things for certain, the way in which narratives about families are written are they’re either a good family fallen on hard times or you know a dismal…behavioural…and they shouldn’t be allowed to have children type of family. But that is entirely the judgement of the people involved in making those decisions, but it’s the kind of…the types of sources that you’ll get, a lot the - so my supervisor has written a lot about this and I’ve read all the remaining ones - letters from mothers who were there to the warden, to members of staff, and those kind of things that yes they are performative, they’re saying you know I had such a wonderful time a lot of the time but they also talk about the sort of personal ups and downs and difficulties and experiences and things like that, there’s a very moving series of letters for me that illustrated that about how a social worker was castigating this family and splitting them apart and yet the family in question were – both sides of the correspondence survives, mainly because of the way they were in at the time, so it’s an the older daughter, it’s a slightly unusual case – but talking about sitting in the kitchen, listening to rock and roll and things like that, you know, having this window into someone’s life in such a way that it’s not about care and about the authorities and that, it’s them, but that’s survived in a way that I think in proceedings records or sort of formal care records that they wouldn’t have survived. So, with some reservations, there is that side to them.

**Victoria**

Yeah, and you talked a bit there about the kind of more personal and individual side of the record, so letters, photographs and so on, what percentage of the case files for Brentwood have that kind of material would you say?

**G402**

I’d say probably a very small number. So there are sort of two sequences within the collection, within the case files you’ll find letters sort of within files…so bearing in mind here that ‘file’ is a lose term, you sort of think of something in a foolscap or envelope, it’s not, it’s just papers stapled or paperclipped whatever together. There is a huge amount of mixing up either in the sort of cataloguing process but I think more likely in the original administrative process because of the way in which they’ve been kept, that you go into an untouched thing from the archivist’s point of view and yet it’s just all over the place. But there is also a separate file of letters that have turned up from elsewhere, sort of have fallen out or wherever they’ve come from, that have sort of been kept and there is some corresponding details between sort of individual files and these letters. But there are some letters for mothers that aren’t in the case record. But I’d say it’s only about 5-10% sort of as a ballpark figure, I’d say the vast majority it’s sort of submission, referral – except not all of them have got that – sponsoring sort of social worker reports beforehand – again, not all of them have got that – sort of a warden’s report about the family – I’ll say it every time, but not all of them have got that – and then afterwards there’ll be these kind of follow up reports, but you’ll have more information for families that have been back to Brentwood more than once, so by virtue they’re the families that are more likely to have letters and so that does present an uneven picture of what’s going on through sustained contact. It’s not always the case but certainly more predominant.

**Victoria**

Yeah, it’s interesting, I’m quite interested in this question of whose voice emerges through the records, whose story is it possible to tell, and it sounds from what you’ve said as though that is very dependent on individual files and their makeup but generally speaking, whose story would you say is being told?

**G402**

So the answer is in my PhD thesis, that I originally started off kind of in the way in which people have done historically on ‘problem families’ has always been one about problem families as a narrative of developing social services, that the records speak more to structures of power and authority. And there’s one pair of authors who tried to circumvent this a little by reading against the grain, Becky Taylor and Ben Rogaly, and they’ve written an article using Norwich’s unsatisfactory household committee and they tried to read into issues of seasonal labour, domestic abuse and things like that by going through the details of the files, and I wanted to try and present this sort of social history, and I said this to someone whose written quite a bit on ‘problem families’ and they said – this is right at the beginning – they said just read it and then come back and by the time that I’d got through all the files and linked the evidence, the only story I could tell was about the history of administration, bureaucracy and social services, because those were the voices that were actually making the decisions that had been taken about and around families. That’s not to say that there weren’t moments where voices of the people in question were present but they were drowned out overwhelmingly by that of sort of the state system which put them in Brentwood, and that was a story that needed to be told.

**Victoria**

Yeah, which brings up interesting ethical questions about the idea of reading against the grain and the extent to which it is the researcher’s job to do that with the record, without input from the individual or individuals who are the subjects of the record. Interesting. Well I think that is the end of my questions, is there anything else that you would like to observe from your experiences that you think might be valuable?

**G402**

I think the only thing that I would like to sort of make a point of putting clearly across I think in terms of accessing different types of sources is the way that for me from a voluntary organisation doing things that was given money by a children’s department or whatever at the time, they’re basically acting as surrogate agents of social services and yet they’re not always ruled by the same kinds of transparency shall we say about these kinds of decision making processes and understanding that it’s all part of the same structures of people that are sort of responsible for families, children, their lives, it’s not just sort of children’s departments at the time it’s a whole litany of organisations, and yet it’s very very different across those kinds of organisations, if you kind of see what I mean?

**Victoria**

Yeah, I do, thank you. Brilliant. Ok, I will stop recording.

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held on 6th September 2018 between Professor G403 and Victoria Hoyle, by telephone.

**BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW**

**Victoria**

Thank you again for agreeing to chat about these issues. I wondered if you could start by briefly describing your field of specialism and research interests?

**G403**

Ok, well I think my research interests are very broadly around family - family, parenting, marginalised children and young people - and I do…I would say I probably do have a particular interest in historical comparative work. I mean, I could go on but that pretty much sums it up really.

**Victoria**

Yes and I think that leads us nicely into talking about how you’ve used social care records in your research, particularly in this kind of historical comparative field.

**G403**

Yes, well, it’s…the project that you’re referring to, that was an ESRC project. It was specifically part of their secondary data analysis initiative, where they try and encourage researchers to use already collected data, and we kind of realised there was an opportunity there - because the term data is quite, you know, a large term - and that we could perhaps use records. I mean I should say there was a context there in that we’d done some previous historical comparative work using actual research data from the 1960s, kind of community studies that were done on lone mothers and various others, and I think you know at that point we started to think, because it was a very kind of rich data set and it gave us such an important insight into parenting and the way that parenting values have changed, and it was a kind of an insight that perhaps we realised we couldn’t get through any other kind of methodological approach other than historical comparative work. So we started thinking about what other sources we might be able to use to get a better insight into kind of family and parenting through different periods of time. So we took the secondary data analysis initiative opportunity and at that time there was a lot of kind of policy angst around what were called ‘troubled families’ and we recognised immediately that that was an issue that went right back into history, in terms of sort of governments and voluntary agencies, you know there being kind of particular concerns around ‘problem families’ and various different kind of arrangements, if you know what I mean. So we thought that would be a really good project, to look back over time and we came across…I think at the time we were possibly working on another project, yes that was it, and we came across the [...] archives. We came across them from the other end if you know what I mean, we were looking back through time and looking at voluntary organisations and the Charity Organisation Society, as [...] once were, were just so incredibly influential as a charity and voluntary organisation right through history and so it was fascinating, first of all, to find they still existed, and we realised then at that point that doing some work in the archives…that there was this most extraordinary archive that they had, with all of these case papers, from having worked with families right back to 1869. So it seemed at that point that this was a really good opportunity to work with that and look across time. So the project itself looked at four periods of time, the first one going right back, we looked at the 1880s…in fact, the way we organised it was around periods of recession, so we looked at the…what was it?...the Long Depression I think it was called, which was the 1880s to the sort of mid 1890s, and then we looked at the Great Depression, which was the 1930s, and we looked at the Oil Crisis then in the 1970s, and then you know the most recent one, the Global Crisis, which was then, at that point when there was a lot of focus on so called ‘troubled families’. So that was the project, and we had contacted [...], we weren’t speaking with the Chief Executive at the time, we were talking to another member of Board there who was quite enthusiastic and very helpful and so we applied to work with their archive.

**Victoria**

Brilliant, and so was this prior to making the application to the ESRC that you were in conversation with [...]?

**G403**

Yes it was, I mean that was a condition in fact of the ESRC application, that we needed to have a research partner on board in some way, so yes we needed them…it wasn’t just a letter in fact, I think it was quite detailed…I’m trying to remember now because it was a few years ago, but they needed to explain exactly…I mean they weren’t co-applicants but I think they were classified as – I’m trying to remember what the terminology was now – as a partner, that’s it, a partner, so they weren’t a co-applicant but they were a partner. So yeah we did speak to them, we did quite a few meetings beforehand trying to work out, well, what would they want from our research. We actually, in fact, it guided the focus – I forgot to say this – it guided the focus of the research, on interagency working, which was something they were interested in.

**Victoria**

Yeah. So how did you hear about or find out about the [...] archive in the first instance, do you remember?

**G403**

Yes, I do. Going back, we were – and the thing is I can’t remember exactly what we were looking for – but we had a research assistant who did a little bit of work for us looking up potential sources, to look at…I think we had something very specific in mind, we were looking for information from the 1960s, I think, we were looking for 50s and 60s it was, on parents of children up to or under 7. [laughs] I actually can’t remember why, what the rationale was there, because we ended up going in a different direction. So we had a researcher looking for potential sources and they came across… It wasn’t easy to find.

**Victoria**

Yes, that’s sort of, I suppose, the intent behind my question, is to ask how straightforward it was to identify material that was going to be valuable to you?

**G403**

Not at all, no, it took a fair bit of work. It just happened that we had a budget, an underspent budget that we used to employ a research assistant, in fact she wasn’t, she was contracted in, she wasn’t even…she was someone who specialised I think in family history and research and she just sort of gave us a list of potential sources that we could follow up. And then we sat on that for about 6 or 7 years I think it was, and I remembered that, and we had in fact…so she had been to [...] - I’m trying to remember if they were even called [...] at the time, they may have had a different name – and had sort of visited there and spoken to a very helpful person there and yeah, she was able to access some of the material, so she had copied some stuff for us, and I remember how fascinating that looked. So it took a long time before we were able to pursue it, to take it anywhere, but I knew it was there from that, and it was certainly something in my mind. But I don’t even know who she spoke to, or how she retrieved that material. I think it was possible she had been given permission to then go to the London Metropolitan Archives, I think that’s where she got it from, but it was material that would have been kind of restricted definitely because it did have people’s names and addresses on it, and it was from - the material that she gave us - was actually from the 1930s I think, she just gave us that as an example of some of the material that was there. Yeah, but I mean they don’t…[laughs] [...] moved from a really kind of ramshackle old house in Dalston, huge house, huge, with a very large basement, where they had just filled it top to bottom with old records, and they moved a whole lot of them out into London Metropolitan Archives and a whole lot more had gone to a storage unit somewhere, I think in Milton Keynes or somewhere, but this kind of basement was still [laughs] it was still, you know, chock full of records and all sorts of things, but it was a near-on health hazard to go down there. [laughs] I did go down there, you had to wear a mask the dusk was so thick, it was choking, it was really dark and it was damp and the material was all rotting away and, yeah….

**Victoria**

That sounds like an all too familiar sorry story. But I assume now - because they have moved haven’t they? - I assume now that the records have been moved also?

**G403**

Well they have yes, they had to be. A lot of them got destroyed which was tragic but a lot of them *had* to be destroyed because they were in such poor condition. They did move a lot of it to their storage unit, apparently they have these lock up units all over the place, but…oh, it made us feel quite…we were so sad about it because the records are just indescribably valuable, you know it’s not just case papers because they were such a force in British social policy from like their formation in 1869 right up you know to…I mean I think most of their material seemed to disappear around about 1970…but they were an incredibly influential organisation with, you know, the sort of records of the great and good and their involvement in all kinds of issues. So it was, oh, it was quite awful really to see these really important papers rotting away, and they were so fascinating some of them were, but the size of their archive…I mean I lot of their stuff is in the London Metropolitan Archives but a lot isn’t, and while we were working on the project they used to arrange for boxes to be brought down from their storage units and we had…I remember when we first came in it was basically a whole room full of boxes, something like 24 very large boxes filled with all kinds of, you know, treasure. It was just impossible really to kind of go through them all, I mean we did have a historian working on the project for a little while and just his horror at it, you know British social policy in a whole series of boxes in this room. [laughs] But anyway, that’s an aside. And of course it was all mixed up, so there were records mixed up with, you know…some people’s records mixed up with kind of papers of their own, you know organisational papers, and policy papers and all kinds of things all mixed up.

**Victoria**

So let me just make sure I understand. Part of their archive was at London Metropolitan Archives and the other part was still in the custody of [...], and you used both sides of the collection? Thinking about it, was there a distinction between the two? Were certain types of material at London Met versus other types of material still with [...]?

**G403**

Erm, well I think what had happened is they had…in fact I’m not sure and this is interesting because the institution itself, [...], had…you know institutions, if a lot of people leave, then the memories go with them about where things are, why things were done in the way they were, so they had no idea what they had or where it was. We found it very difficult. [laughs] So they think what happened - and they don’t know themselves - was that at some point in the…now I think it was around about the time when the Data Protection Act came in, I think that may have panicked them…but that might have been a second wave of archiving though I’m not sure…but I think there was a sense that something that had to be done with the papers, so they took a lot out and sent them over to London Metropolitan Archives. I should say as well actually that there’s another archive that we came across, that we didn’t know about, at University of London, at…I think it’s at Senate House, so it’s all over the place. And yeah I don’t know what the rationale was for what they decided to archive and what they didn’t. There weren’t very many case records I think in the material they’ve got in their lock ups, it was more to do with you know how the institution was run and various different things, because there were research projects and things like that that they’d done over the years. You know but we were interested in that because you know when you do the historical comparative research you need the context otherwise it makes no sense, if you know what I mean? You could take a whole set of case papers but you can’t understand or have a really good you know awareness of the significance of them unless you have a really good understanding of the context in which they were created. So we needed that context. I’m trying to remember now, you know, it was just an absolute mass of papers and letters and yeah all kinds of things really. Photographs, they had photographs there as well. Yeah, I mean, it was overwhelming. That was our sense really at the time, just completely overwhelmed. And it was very hard, it’s one of the real challenges when you do that kind of historical comparative work, is you never know what’s in the archives and [sighs] it’s never ordered properly, so you can just spend [sighs] months just combing through trying to find the stuff that you actually want, you know, that’s relevant to you.

**Victoria**

Yeah, it sounds as though there hadn’t been a great deal of archival intervention, cataloguing or indexing or anything like that prior to you using it?

**G403**

No, and that was even an issue at the London Metropolitan Archives as well. [...]…of course you know their remit is to help families, it’s not to [laughs]…you know if they’ve got money to spend it’s not going to be on their archive, so you know I think that was a real… that was sort of frustrating in a way, because we knew there was nothing we could about those papers, and ordering them would have been so so valuable to future researchers, just immeasurably valuable, but there was nothing we could do about that really. We kind of weren’t even aware of where you could get funding to do that. Yeah, so there was that. But even the ones that had gone to London Metropolitan Archives were in a mess, so they were, you know and I suppose maybe this is a feature of archive work, that you don’t often know what’s necessarily in the archive. I know archivists get quite annoyed when you say that [both laugh] but you know I think it’s true. We discovered when we were working in the University of Essex archives looking at some of their sort of old community studies data, and they have an amazing archive there, but we came across all sorts of things, like unpublished books by very famous researchers and you know, it just seemed like wow they’re all just in a dusty box in, you know, the back of a store room. So yeah, I think it was the same at the London Metropolitan Archives. And it made it very very difficult for us to look at it because the way they were catalogued was sometimes they were catalogued in bunches, and sometimes in individual items, individual pages, they were separated sometimes from the rest of the sort of files, sometimes there would just be one letter, and of course the way that you access this material in London Metropolitan Archives is painful. You have to request it and then you can’t sort of…you then move into the room where you can go and look at it, but only when it’s come through, so you can only request five at a time and then you have to take it and sit at a desk really close to them, you can only take one item at a time, so it’s really…you know [laughs] it’s really not easy to do, particularly for us when we were trying to work out, you know…because the labels themselves weren’t very illuminating and we were trying to work out well what would be in there. Cos we had our own boundaries around what it was we were interested in. We were interested in it all really, but you know we had to…we were looking at…we wanted case files from London, we wanted you know case files involving children, there were various different…in a particular date range…so it made it quite difficult. And yeah they were very messy at London Archives and just in boxes at [...].

**Victoria**

Obviously you had permission from [...] to look at their material prior to the research starting but were there any other processes that you had to go through at London Metropolitan Archives in order to gain access, around the Data Protection Act?

**G403**

No, not as I remember. We needed to show them a letter. I don’t know, would that have changed now, I don’t know? No we just…

**Victoria**

I ask only because some archives use a data protection protocol whereby they would ask the researcher to fill in some kind form, like a disclaimer, that invokes the research exemptions of the Data Protection Act.

**G403**

Right, I don’t remember having to do that but it’s not impossible that we did, I can’t…because it would have been like registering in a sense for us and I may have, I just can’t remember. I should say as well that it wasn’t just London Metropolitan Archives. The other issue, which was a complication, is that [...] first of all, lost of all their data from the 1970s, and we think this was a consequence of the Data Protection Act, that perhaps they destroyed it or…we don’t know…but there was a hole basically in their archives in relation to case papers. And given that our focus was on the 70s - one of our sort of lenses was the 70s - that was a bit difficult for us, so we then started to look around for other organisations that might have case papers from the 1970s and there was Family Service Units. Now Family Service Units were eventually kind of amalgamated with [...] but not until I think around about…it could have been 2010 and even. But because they were amalgamated it meant then that [...] was responsible for their archive, but their archive [laughs] such that it is… first of all was at University of Liverpool, so we had to go to University of Liverpool, but it was [sighs] because the organisation kind of got into financial trouble and had to be kind of…well folded really, because it became part of [...], but you know there were no longer the Family Service Units, and they were, you know, quite sensitive, they were a big organisation, they had branches all over the country, but they didn’t know what to do with all of their papers and it just so happened that there was a researcher, or a couple of researchers and some of the people that worked for Family Service Units, who were aware at the time of just how important their records were, because they were doing…working with families…and you know the idea of just destroying this material…so in fact what they had done was at the very last minute just got bin liners and just gone around and collected all of this stuff from…I mean it’s very variable because some branches wouldn’t allow them to take stuff and said we have to destroy it, so they just went around from branch to branch collecting as much stuff as they could in these bin liners, and then because the researcher was at the University of Liverpool you know they organised - and apparently that wasn’t easy - but they managed to persuade the University of Liverpool to hold this as an archive. So it’s very very patchy, the material they have got there, but we did manage to find quite a few case studies there that fit our criteria, so our study worked with [...], in terms of the organisation that evolved from…I’m trying to remember that their name was, gosh…Family Welfare, that’s it, the Family Welfare Association, into [...] but there’s another organisation in there as well for the 1970s. So yeah, I don’t know if that’s at all of any relevance or interest, but you know I mean there’s some amazing stuff in that archive in Liverpool and some of it would certainly be of interest to children when they’ve grown up, there’s all kinds of sort of drawings that kids did, photographs, and yeah all kinds of stuff there as well. But I can’t remember how we got into that, why was I telling you that?

**Victoria**

Was it to do with different access regimes?

**G403**

Yes, different access regimes, yeah, so as far as I can remember they were more strict at Liverpool than they were at London Metropolitan Archives, I seem to remember, because they got…they were a little bit more flexible at London Metropolitan Archives…yeah they were slightly more concerned about it I seem to remember at University of Liverpool, at their Archives, but yeah I can’t remember anything more about the access really or anything that we signed at the time.

**Victoria**

Yeah, at any time did you have contact with individuals who had received services from [...] or this other charity? So, did you look at records in tandem with speaking to individuals?

**G403**

Yes, right, we did but only on a few occasions and that was around the ethical consent, so it wasn’t the…the access we had was pretty brief really, it wasn’t anything more than just asking for consent really. Because we were working across different time periods obviously the issue for us - you know, we’re not historians - was around consent and anxiety really around what do we do? Because you know it felt quite straightforward when we were working with the papers from the 1880s, you know no one’s going to be alive so that’s clearly historical material. The 1930s stuff was more…there was more anxiety around it. We weren’t entirely sure what to do, whether to use people’s real names, you know? Because the sense was well the children of these people may be alive and we ended up coming out and thinking well we’ll use the real names for the 1930s cases. The 1970s…that was, you know, clearly we didn’t feel like we could use the names again, because people could still be alive, it’s extremely likely, and then looking at the case material from 2010, it was 2010 to 2015, that’s where we felt we needed actual consents you know sort of from families to use it. But we came up against at that point the…I suppose it was at a point in time where there was a moving over towards kind of mass consent, so you consent when you work with [...], so some of the material there wasn’t that kind of…I can’t remember what the phrasing is now, what is that? You know when you give consent basically you have to opt out rather than opt in to consent?

**Victoria**

Yeah, that would no longer be allowed, but yes at the time it would. Under the new legislation that’s not sufficient, it’s not sufficiently informed consent but no under the previous legislation there was sort of a…you could use kind of a disclaimer of…simply by interacting with [...] you are giving them permission to hold and reuse your data.

**G403**

Right, that’s interesting, because I’m very interested now in data linkage and how that’s being used, so are you saying there’s a difference then for quantitative and qualitative material?

**Victoria**

Well, under the new Data Protection legislation that’s arisen from GDPR, out of the EU, it’s both more and less permissive than it used to be. In terms of the bar for anonymization and pseudonymisation, it’s much higher than it used to be in terms of what the legislation considers to be anonymised data, so data for example that has a lot of linkages where you can sort of profile an individual’s data at quite a high level of granularity would almost be considered not be anonymous anymore, even though it’s been stripped of identifying markers, because potentially in a digital age you would be able to use the information you do have about their characteristics or their life experiences to trace it back to an individual… At the same time it’s actually more permissive for qualitative research because there is a much broader exemption for historical and social science research than there was previously. So it’s, yeah, the legislative landscape is quite interesting, but certainly what has changed is that consent…if you are going to hold data on the basis of consent, then that consent has to be informed and the individual must be aware of all the potential uses of that data will be put to, including research uses, when it is collected. A lot of social care services are not delivered on the basis of consent though, they’re delivered on the basis of public task and you don’t require consent for a public task, like a legislatively mandated task, like for example child protection, you don’t require any consent to hold and manage that data. So what then happens to it in the future is…the individual subject of that data…a lot of places would argue that they have no right to object to it on the basis of not having given consent because consent was never required under the law.

**G403**

I’m just trying to…because I know there was a particular Act passed around ‘troubled families’ in particular and data linkage because there is a mass of kind of [sighs] oh kind of companies that are offering data linkage services to local authorities on those that are part of the ‘troubled families’ programme, so I know that was actually passed as a kind of…I think it might have been an amendment or something. I mean this is before the new Data Protection Act has come in, so I don’t know how that has affected it, but I was rather shocked to discover that. Do you know anything about that?

**Victoria**

I don’t know anything specifically about that case but I mean there are other instances of highly linked data that would be equivalent, for example the National Pupil Database where they are mandated in law and in some cases they are…they kind of trump the Data Protection legislation.

**G403**

It makes a bit of a mockery out of it really doesn’t it then? If you think about it. These are sort of vulnerable families and you know children and yeah, the people that perhaps you would have thought… but you know I think the kind of narrative of data linkage and that it’s this sort of brave new world that we’re going to solve all these problems with perhaps just means that people don’t tend to see it as an ethical issue. Perhaps they should. Yeah, it’s interesting. But for us we didn’t… because obviously there’s what we can do and what we should do, and we did spend a lot of time thinking about that. We worked with two services in terms of the more contemporary data within [...] that were delivering ‘troubled families’ programmes and one of them was part of…again it’s part of another organisation that [...] had kind of merged with and it was [sighs] kind of delivering a different kind of service. The ‘troubled families’ programme is very complex and not very clear in terms of what counts as…basically what’s happened is that the local authorities kind of appropriated any services that were already running and then turned them into ‘troubled families’ services so people didn’t necessarily even know that they were part of…well they didn’t, most of them didn’t know at all that they were part of the ‘troubled families’ programme. So we worked with two different services and they were quite different in the way that they operated. So with the first one they were still using kind of records that were kept on file, but the second one it was all done through a system, you know an online kind of digital system. With the first one we felt well you know the families are there and we know we can just go and ask them and that felt like the most sensible thing to do, so that’s what we did, but that’s the only contact really, and that’s with a researcher on our project who basically went and kind of introduced herself and sat with the mothers…ah gosh I’m trying to remember now, because obviously the issue there, which is dawning on me, is that there were often fathers involved, less often I may say, I think it was fairly rare that they were, but there were… for most of them, I’m trying to remember, I think there weren’t fathers around but I do remember one case where there was, and I don’t remember whether we…I think we did try to get the father’s permission but I think it wasn’t possible, or there was some issue where – as I think happens often in research – where the mother ended up consenting for the father, you know not in terms of when they’re involved in the research but obviously they’re talking about the father and you can’t get the father to participate. Ah my memory is a bit shaky on that now, on what we actually did. Maybe I’ll have to dig around and see if I can find out. But that was the only…. The other service that we used everything was on digital record and our problems in accessing that, I mean we did have problems with accessing that because…the way it’s organised is it’s actually quite hard to draw anything out, I mean I remember at the time wondering what on earth it was for. I sort of realise now that you know it’s all sort of quantitative data linkage, but the amount of material on the file that wouldn’t be relevant, you know it’s not quantitative or it would require a lot more interpretation, you know it’s vast, but yeah, so it was really quite difficult. Again it was the researcher, Nicola Horsley, who pulled it out…she worked with the organisation and she was assured at the time that people had given their consent, so we didn’t dig any further than that. We did realise afterwards that…and I do remember speaking to someone at [...] about it and them saying well everything now that we do it’s written into it that they consent…they consent to anything, just by working with our service that means they have consented. I remember we were a little bit shocked by that [laughs] that that could be ok, but I mean that service, it was much more difficult to even access the files that we wanted.

**Victoria**

And so with the digital material was that sort of extracted from the system and then did you kind of hold that digitally yourselves while you were working on it, do you remember?

**G403**

Because the digital material was all using real names, what we did was we went in to the service and then we…somehow Nicola managed to establish which ones were relevant, using their computers within the service, and then we downloaded them and changed the names while we were in the service so we didn’t have any material that had any identifying names or places. But the strange thing about this was I had been working before that on a research project with…it was kind of ethnography, I’ve got a longstanding ethnography in schools with young people at risk of school exclusion, and I recognised immediately one of the cases - even though all the names had been changed - as one of the boys that I had worked with. He’d been excluded from school, I knew that, but yeah it was quite fascinating really actually to find out what had happened after he had been excluded because he dropped out of my research having been excluded and then of course that meant I didn’t know anything more about him. I think what was so fascinating about that was the records that they had on the family – it was the family – I mean what had happened was he had ended up in a secure unit for street robbery, but also he had been…his life was under threat because…he wasn’t really involved with gangs, but there was a contract out on him and it was basically…they had to move the family from you know one end of the country to the other because his life was at risk, and the family were in danger as well, there were several younger members of the family as well. It was interesting to find what they had on the file about him as a service, because what I realised immediately from looking at this was they didn’t have all sorts of details that we had, because we’d worked with him earlier on, so we knew for instance about his…we knew for instance that he hadn’t started school until he was 10, we knew that he was a refugee from a war-torn African country, we knew about all the details about before that had led up to him ending up getting excluded from school and ending up sort of being convicted of street robbery. So I was quite fascinated by that, by the fact that the details that they held on him were actually quite limited, they didn’t seem to know a lot about his earlier life, so yeah. But the other thing about that of course was I was writing a book based on the ethnographic research and then I had to make a decision about whether I included the material from the ‘troubled families’ archival work, or whether I left that out, and you know there was just no guidance about that at all really, I mean I just had to make a decision to include it because it felt so important and powerful, you know, because there was material in there about how he had become reattached to education and you know and how he’d studied inside the secure unit and I felt that was really important to include that, but ethically I was just…there was no guidance there. You know, can you use something from one project to the next? It was a call I had to make.

**Victoria**

A very serendipitous example I suppose, it’s not something that you expect is it, to find information about a person that you’ve worked with previously in a completely different context. But I’m really interested by what you said about the content of the record, in that particular case, and the picture of that young person and his family that it drew, which was so very different from the one that you had, and I wondered generally what your opinion of the kind of the quality and the usefulness of the records was?

**G403**

Mmm, well that’s interesting because obviously what we had as well was a comparative viewpoint over time, so we had records from the 1970s and the difference between the records from the 1970s and the records from the kind of 2010 onwards…they were very different. The amount of information collected in the more contemporary stuff was massive, it was an explosion of material they had, but the actual quality of it was far less. The material from the 1970s was really fascinating because it was very narrative based, it was stories about families, and about…I suppose it was kind of making lots of assumptions as well about how families were working and what was going on and the different roles that family members were assuming and that kind of stuff. What we had in the material from 2010 onwards was a focus on parenting and whether people were parenting in an appropriate way, sort of *really* narrow and a lot of it was kind of scales, you know, so they would be measured on warmth of parenting and on boundary setting, so there was a lot of that, there was an awful lot of focus on how the mother was interacting with the child. The difference as well actually, that’s the other interesting thing, is who the focus of the record was on, because the name of the records from the 2000s onwards were in the child’s name, whereas the focus was much more on the family and the parents in the 1970s. The focus was on the child in terms of the name the file was in, it was the…I think it was the youngest child it was always in the name of. So it was all around the quality of parenting the child is receiving, so it’s very child centric in that sense. But the difference of the material was largely around that, there just wasn’t that level of…there were sometimes observations about how mothers were parenting but very little else about sort of the dynamics. There were some indications of the sort of material deprivation, we did get that in the 2000s onwards, but there were tools as well, lots of tools being used in the contemporary material, to measure, measuring tools I suppose, it was very very concerned with measuring in the contemporary stuff, whereas like I said it was more qualitative and more narrative based in the 1970s, and in the material before that in fact.

**Victoria**

Which is really interesting to then think about how a subject of those records, a young person, later on in their life how they might understand and approach that subsequently, you know, if they are using a lot of technical language, a lot of tools and techniques which are specific to social work practice of the day. What kind of story could a person tell about what might have been quite a confusing episode of those lives from those records.

**G403**

Yes, yes, that’s a good point. I mean in some ways I suppose it’s less personalised in a way, I mean not all of it, clearly it’s not…I suppose actually there’s less humanity in the more contemporary accounts, there’s less sense that they’re…maybe that’s not entirely fair because the write-ups, you do get a sense of them as people, but not to quite the same extent as you do in the 1970s. It may be of course that we’re getting…it’s limited what we’ve had access to and it’s entirely possible that the material that we were using in the 1970s wasn’t the norm, I don’t know, because we don’t know, there was so little of it, you know we had to work with what we had, but you know there was just pages and pages of these very descriptive accounts of working with families and there were amazing very very long kinds of essays as well on how the team worked, which we found quite fascinating, you know how they worked together, you know the team in the family service units. There was so much reflection going on in a way that there really isn’t I don’t think quite so much now anyway.

**Victoria**

That’s really very interesting. I wondered if just to finish off we could talk a bit more about the ethical implications of this kind of work. I know we’ve touched on that throughout the conversation. But particularly thinking about university processes for ethical approval, could you describe the process you had to go through for approval in this case?

**G403**

Yes, ok, so I was at Goldsmiths University at that point and they had a kind of light touch ethical approval system where it was reviewed I think by two people in the department, in the sociology department, and we were a little bit worried at the time, again this was us, we did this, it wasn’t required but at the time when we were doing the research it was in the midst of all kinds of…the child abuse scandals and, you know, all kinds of very bizarre and worrying accusations being made about you know people, politicians and people in positions of power in the 1970s, so we started to worry at that point about what on earth we might find in the files from the 1970s and what to do if we came across evidence of abuse, you know. Whereas it would be relatively clear in the more contemporary stuff but in the 1970s of course you’ve got…it’s 40, 50 years ago now, so yeah we worried a bit about that and in the end we decided we would set up…we would have two people on standby, one of them in fact was a Deputy Children’s Commissioner and somebody else at Goldsmiths whose work was on children, and we just said to them would you be available as an ethics panel for us so that we can run…because you know we weren’t sure what we might find and even if we did find something, we might find something that was just a little bit worrying and then we would want input from other people, so that’s what we did. But the actual ethics procedure as far as I remember…it was quite good actually as ethics forms go in that it really did make us consider and think about it very carefully, in fact I think it might have been in filling out that form that we decided that we really did need a panel, just on hand, just in case anything came up. But honestly, ethics boards more generally I despair of [both laugh] you know they’re just so focused on the kind of legal ramifications and you end up being pushed into things that aren’t particularly ethical a lot of the time I think. They completely defeat the purpose that they’re there for you know, they prompt people to not think very ethically I think.

**Victoria**

And as a result of working through the form did you make any decisions about how you were going to present any information from the records in your research?

**G403**

I think we’d probably thought about that before we’d put the application in. That was the point that we decided that we would not name anyone from the 1970s, that we would make sure no one’s name was used but we would use the names from the 1930s. So we’d kind of thought a lot of that kind of stuff through, yeah, on the basis that it is a historical document you know in the 1930s. I’m trying to think if there was anything else that we came up against that we needed to think through…no I don’t think at point no. There was the issue then around [...] and I’m remembering now that because we did feel uncomfortable about the, you know, people opt-out in terms of consent…but there was a problem around contacting them and I cannot remember what they was. There was a problem in that…I just cannot remember I’m sorry about this.

**Victoria**

That’s ok.

**G403**

I just think there was some reason why we couldn’t contact people in the digitalised version and it was to do with the digitalised version. I don’t remember. What we did think with the earlier stuff…we didn’t ask for consent for the 1970s material because we felt it would be ethically more damaging to be contacting people all this time afterwards and making them aware of all this material and that, you know, children would have grown up and it could have caused all kinds of, you know, problems within families, to go back and to say look there’s all this material on you when you’ve potentially got, you know, the mother’s still alive, the children are grown up middle aged now and you know the potential for that you know to really be extremely harmful. So yes, sorry I forgot that, I should have said that, so we made that decision that we wouldn’t contact anybody to ask for consent but we wouldn’t use the names.

**Victoria**

Thank you. I think that sort of brings my questions to a close. It’s been very interesting, because you’ve navigated these issues across such a long chronological timescale and used what I suppose we would consider historical records and also contemporary records of families receiving services now, it makes it very interesting to see the comparison and the different kinds of challenges that it presents, and the different challenges of the formats as well, from the analogue paper records to the digital. Just before we finish is there anything else that you want to add? Is there anything that occurs to you now before I stop recording.

**G403**

No, I don’t think so, no. Nope can’t think of anything. But I’d be really interested to see what comes out of the project though.

**Victoria**

Thank you. I will stop recording now.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

Interview held on 15th October 2018 between G404 and Victoria Hoyle, via Skype.

*NB: The names of organisations which will be redacted if used in publications or presentations have been placed in square brackets.*

**BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW**

**Victoria**

Thank you again for agreeing to talk. If you could just start by describing your field of specialism and your current research interests?

**G404**

So, broadly I work as a cultural sociologist, so I’m interested broadly in the use of moral meanings in society and what that, in recent years, has got me particularly interested in is the moral framing of childcare interventions that have led to the removal of children from families or local communities. What I’ve been working on specifically within that, over the past four or five years, has been the history of the British child migration programmes. So these were welfare interventions that really began seriously in the late 1860s and carried on really… well the last British child migrants that we know of being sent overseas went in 1970, but really the schemes were significantly winding down through the 1960s. And so I’ve been involved in a range of work relating to that. I’ve co-curated an academic exhibition at the Museum of Childhood, called On Their Own, which we can talk about if that’s helpful, and I did some kind of spin off public engagement projects throughout that, including a music project called The Ballads of Child Migration. After the exhibition I wrote a book called Remembering Child Migration which was more of an overview, quite a broad overview, of that history. But since the exhibition I was then – on the basis of the work I did with the exhibition – invited to be one of two lead expert witnesses for IICSA, for their investigation of the child migration programmes. And so was under instruction as an expert witness with them from September 2016 till about… I think it was August 2017, and through that work, with my other lead expert witness […], we wrote about a quarter of a million words in terms of the main report and 21 addenda to that, and I gave evidence over nine days of the public hearings for that as well. Which was both a broad policy overview of how these schemes operated and operational issues within them, but also looking at records of specific sending organisations as well, because although framed within a government policy setting and usually funded – particularly after 1922 – through British government funding, linked to Empire settlement, the majority of the work was really initiated by charities and churches. And so they were - we can talk more about the kind of detail of that later on again if that’s helpful - but they were operating with a fair degree of autonomy but within a somewhat regulated and funded system by central government. And since then I’m now on an AHRC Leadership Fellows project which is working towards the production of the first detailed history of post-war UK child migration to Australia, and that’s really looking specifically at how these schemes came to be restarted after the Second World War in the kind of wider context of the Curtis Committee Report. So it’s really looking at the ways in which child migration clearly fell below standards that were set out in the Curtis Report, even though the Curtis Report had specifically said that child migration work should only be undertaken in the post-war period if it actually met the standards set out in the report. And so it’s looking at how policy failure occurred really over a twenty year period in relation to that, but where issues of the treatment of children are clearly kind of central to that, given what we know about the extent of the abuse and neglect that many child migrants experienced overseas. Partly then on the back of that I’m now just starting to do some work with the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, similar to IICSA although obviously with IICSA’s focus on sexual abuse that kind of skewed our focus in a particular way and the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, although it involves a smaller number of child migrants, has a wider remit in terms of the kinds of abuse that we might be looking at there.

**Victoria**

So it sounds as though for all of this work you’ve had to look at quite a broad range of records relating to child migration?

**G404**

That’s right, so the primary – and certainly for the book – the primary sources that I’m going to be using are files from the UK National Archives and the Australian National Archives, and some from Australian state archives as well, which are…those are all for the most part open, open files. And a lot of them, for the most part, they’re policy files, and occasionally they do contain references to individuals, but there are some files in the Australian National Archives that particularly relate to migration documents that would have been submitted for each child from Australia House, which actually some of those contain quite a surprising level of detail about individuals, given that those are digitised and available for open access online. So that’s quite surprising, but those files have actually been very useful in terms of tracking issues around who consented to these children being sent overseas. But with IICSA we did do some looking at individual case files but that was, that was actually quite a limited part of the work that we did, in part because of the sheer volume of work, so I think for the most part we were given access to case files of people who’d provided evidence to IICSA in the public hearings, and didn’t look at a wider range of case files than that, but even looking at those there was clearly very significant degrees of practice in terms of retention of records and also recordkeeping as well that we saw between organisations, and which was reflected in some of the panels’ comments in the final report as well.

**Victoria**

So in addition to the records of the National Archives and public sector organisations, you’ve also been looking at records created by voluntary and charitable organisations and other independent organisations. Is that correct?

**G404**

That’s right. I did a bit more of that for the original book Remembering Child Migration and so the organisations who were actually very helpful at that stage with both the exhibition and the book were were excellent, and…I’m just trying to think who…I also got access to the Children Aid Society archives in New York as well, but I have to say it was generally easier getting access to archival material which related to the Canadian schemes, which ran until the 1920s. The […], which is the kind of successor organisation to a Catholic charity which was [a] children’s charity gave me quite limited access to some published material, but I since discovered that they held other archival material there that they didn’t tell me about that related to the post-war period. So I didn’t really…they were quite helpful with some material but actually didn’t really disclose the amount of material they held in other areas at all, so I think weren’t particularly transparent with that. I have to say with this current project I’m not…I will try and do some accessing of voluntary societies now but – something again we may talk about in a bit more detail later – there are some organisations who, for various reasons, have blocked my access now, or made that quite difficult, and because of the volume of material that I’m dealing with at the National Archives, and because it’s a more policy focused piece of work, it may be with the book that I end up just using more National Archives material and that actually a kind of spin off of this work is that I look more at what’s going on more, in terms of voluntary organisations rights of access to researchers. Because I think there’s a wider issue there that’s quite important to be thought about.

**Victoria**

Yes, certainly. We can talk about that in a bit more detail. Just before we do though, in terms of – I suppose this is really related to that – but in terms of your research strategies for finding this information, how do you go about identifying relevant bodies of archival material?

**G404**

Right, it’s…I’m quite fortunate with this project in that there’s been quite a lot of work, of various sorts, done in relation to this, in part because the child migration programmes have been subject to I think it’s probably seven different inquiries or reports since 1997. So through that that’s actually led in Australia to the development of an online reading guide, which is helpful to a large extent, although doesn’t always draw attention to issues of… problematic issues for organisations that it might do, but in terms of actually physically giving you a list of files to look at that’s generally been pretty useful. And in 1997, 1998, the Health Select Committee did a report on the welfare of former British child migrants and in one of the appendices to that the…I think it would have been the Department of Health then, compiled a list of relevant National Archives files as well. So whilst it’s been necessary to do a bit of catalogue searching, usually with kind of adjacent file numbers to check that they haven’t missed anything that’s relevant, which has turned up a few files, in terms of the National Archives a lot of the preparatory work had already been done with that. And because with the post-war schemes we know which organisations were involved in that, because there were eight different organisations which had approval for receiving government funding for this work and one other organisation which operated around the fringes of that, so although there were other organisations that were interested in this, we know the main organisations doing that work, so it has been possible to make contact with each of those to establish what kind of archival material they hold.

**Victoria**

I presume though that these organisations… they have quite different infrastructures for access to their archival materials?

**G404**

Yes, that’s right. I mean, I suppose one of the big differences is where organisations have either in the past or currently had their archives held in a university archives, where they have been - within certain constraints – relatively accessible to researchers, but where there’s been a clear attempt to get these properly archived and to develop a sort of clear cataloguing system and also a reading guide so that you can actually get an overview of what kind of files are held there. So the […] files, which are still held at the University of Liverpool. […] who absorbed […] eventually, they control access to that but the process for that is relatively clear cut. […] have obviously taken their archives back in house but whilst there are various issues around access there it does mean that, at least in principle, there’s kind of clarity about the material that’s available there. And there are also then I think sometimes problems with organisations who have held their archives in university archives, but then have taken them back, so a particular example with this is […], who again we might come back to talking a bit more about later on in terms of how organisations deal with researcher enquiries about archives – my experience of them not being clear and transparent about that – but what appears to have happened is they took that back for cost reasons in a kind of post-financial crisis context, so you can kind of understand the financial pressures on charities. But they took their archives back from […] University in house but not as a managed service, which now creates, as far as they’re concerned, certain barriers for anyone being able to access that material. Which… given that […] were obviously one of the key children’s charities from sort of the 1870s, 1880s, that’s quite a significant gap in knowledge. So you’ve got some organisations who either currently or in the past have used university archives, which helps, and then at the other end of the spectrum are organisations who have always kept in-house records in a way that appears a little idiosyncratic, and certainly in terms of historic practices of recordkeeping in the post-war period, appear as far less rigorous. So organisations like […] and […] certainly had their problems but they would generally have more detailed and systematic recordkeeping for their children, whereas with an organisation like the […] it was very very striking when we tried to get access to case records or post-migration of children that had been sent from their care – and the […] sent around two-thirds of all post war Catholic child migrants – there’s virtually nothing there at all. And I think that causes particular problems for children sent, former child migrants sent by that organisation, where - particularly with the […] - there are very serious issues around how they sought consent for children’s migration and possibly even the legality of some of the children’s migration there. But also children then being told overseas that they were orphans when that actually wasn’t the case at all, and then when former child migrants are really trying to reconstruct their past and be helped to trace family members, this kind of lack of records are very kind of…that’s clearly very problematic for them. So and then I think another example of really poor practice is an organisation called […], who, through their interests in terms of Empire settlement and the enthusiasm of certainly at least one particular member of staff, involved themselves in child migration work, but they weren’t a charity that did any kind of childcare work more generally, and weren’t really set up for that at all. They maybe did kind of issues around cultural exchanges and building a kind of common imperial identity, but they were actually again one of the - with children being sent to New Zealand and to Australia – one of the main players we realised, around the fringes of these kind of funded programmes. They hold no records anymore of any of the children that they sent overseas, so they have no individual files at all, but I think even more worryingly they don’t even know what happened to those files at all. And one of the things we found through IICSA was that they were an organisation around which the Home Office had significant concerns at the time, about their suitability to do the work, because they didn’t…they weren’t a children’s charity at all, and that seems to be very much borne out by the fact that they seem to have just got rid of those records. And I have to say, as an organisation they seem not very interested in dealing with their historic responsibilities for the kind of legacy problems that they created for children through their work. So I think that’s a particular example of bad practice. So, yeah, you can see across those organisations a range of different approaches to recordkeeping there.

**Victoria**

I wonder… I mean clearly records have become an issue of sensitivity for some of these organisations, perhaps almost physically representing some of historic injustices that have been perpetrated…and I wondered the extent to which an inquiry like IICSA has impacted in your perspective on access to these records? You know, has it changed the way that organisations are thinking and working with their archives?

**G404**

It’s interesting, I mean, I think…I remember one archivist saying to me that… I think in terms of how archivists manage these resources I have some sympathies, although some tensions with some of their practices as well, some sympathies with them in that they’re obviously working with organisations which are now very much set up as businesses really, in which – as would have been the case in the past – issues of reputation of the organisation are paramount. And actually this had a bearing in terms of how a child sex abuse scandal relating to child migrants in […] in the 1950s was handled as well, by the government and by […]. So I mean there’s a long history of anxiety about organisational reputation, and I think sometimes archivists feel torn between a desire to sort of maintain records and provide appropriate access to those, and usually have some kind of genuine interest in historical understanding by virtue of doing that work, but at the same time operate in organisational structures where what they actually hold is perceived within the organisation potentially to constitute a significant reputational risk. And one archivist said to me that a senior manager once wished that actually their archives had just been burnt in the kind of 1950s, 1960s, as some organisations seem to have done, because it would make life a lot easier. And that was kind of said in jest but I think there’s probably that sense of archives presenting a kind of risk to people. Another archivist who has been extremely helpful to me, both in terms of giving advice and also access to their archive, said that part of the reason why they’re able to be so helpful is that their archive relates just to children being sent to Canada up to the early 1920s, and if they held kind of post-war archives then that would be much more an issue of sensitivity for that organisation, which would perhaps lead to them being managed quite differently in terms of how requests of access would be granted. I think in terms of… sorry if my answers are too long, do sort of cut in.

**Victoria**

No, no, please do continue.

**G404**

Yeah, in terms of IICSA, it’s obviously a little bit hard to know exactly, because I think obviously organisations by their nature aren’t transparent about how they’re thinking about these archival resources, but… So three quick examples, so […]: I originally got in touch with them about the exhibition, that would be in 2015 I guess, to see just if they held any material, any kind of photographic records that would be useful for the exhibition, and they kind of made noises about wanting to be helpful but didn’t feel they had anything relevant at all, which I didn’t kind of push at all at the time, but when I then got back to them and said I would like to access some of their records for the book they said well, our archives have been closed for the IICSA process on this but once the IICSA report has come out then we can talk again about your access to them. And then when I went back to […] with that they then said access wouldn’t be possible, and the reason for that kept changing. So initially it was because they thought that the records that I wanted couldn’t be separated from children’s case files, and I said look for this project anyway I don’t need access to children’s case files, it’s actually just things like year books, published reports from […] in the post-war period that I’d like to access. And then they said no I couldn’t see that, and I pushed why not, and they said… the implication seemed to be that they didn’t want to encourage any research on this particular topic, because it was a sensitive history, and they weren’t saying that quite explicitly but that was the fairly heavy hint. After that I came back and tried to push why that was the case and the records manager that I was talking to, she said they just couldn’t discuss it with me any further and I then wrote to the acting Chief Executive to just try and clarify exactly why access wasn’t possible, because the story had changed at different points in that conversation, and the acting CEO then came back to me and said it’s actually because the archives have been taken back in house, it’s no longer a managed service, and so we would need to check that none of the records that you’re wanting to see would be compromised in terms of being located with other files and you would be seeing material you wouldn’t want to about individual children. Now, I mean, I didn’t particularly push it any further at that stage, because where we left it was that if I could fund time for someone to go through the archives as a staff member on their behalf that might kind of enable them to identify the material that I wanted to see and then provide access to that, but they still haven’t got back to me on that arrangement at all. But obviously what that conversation didn’t open up was that that material had been archived at […], the year books would have been very clearly separated from children’s files, so unless when they took that material out from […] they juggled all the files up and put just bits of paper into cardboard boxes… Unless they failed to maintain the archiving system that had already been set up it shouldn’t be difficult to find that material at all, and they should actually have a reading list, a reading guide, that should make it possible. So that didn’t strike me as being particularly credible, but also as we talked about before, I wasn’t clear enough at the time about the GDPR researcher waiver that organisations can use, which I’ve generally found organisations are never prepared to talk about or explain whether or not they’re actually prepared to use it in relation to this material. And I think […] I will go back and push that a bit more in the New Year I think. And another example: [...] is a slightly different case in that they at the moment are blocking access to their archives on the grounds that there’s not enough space in their library to be doing research in there because another postdoc is doing work with them at the moment. I think partly they’re upset by…their archives manager said that…when we did the MoC exhibition they expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the interpretative approach that we had taken and thought it was too critical. I found their engagement with that quite emotive, and we actually went back to them and said if you find it too critical can you give us any pointers about text that you’ve seen that you’d like us to change while it’s still in draft form, suggested changes that you’d like to make that we can think about, but they never came back to us on that, which I thought was quite a reasonable offer to make to them. I found the archives’ manager quite unprofessional really in terms of the way that she behaved with that. I found that such an emotive response from her, and I found her quite a complex person to deal with in terms of her being very helpful and then reacting very very strongly to us, and I wondered about the organisational pressures that she was under that might have led to that kind of behaviour. But I then didn’t submit a copy of my book for their library, because I thought if the exhibition had been received so badly I thought they might not necessarily want that, and she then, when I asked for subsequent access for this new project – which actually I’d already got prior permission for – she said she was very unhappy about me having more access because I hadn’t sent a copy of that previous book. I explained that I hadn’t understood that that was actually compulsory and that because she’d reacted so strongly to the exhibition I wasn’t sure they wanted to have a copy of that anyway, but then provided them with two copies of that material. And she also criticised me for – this probably is stuff that I’ll be making you aware of but we might need to not have published in this archive – but she also took me up for things in the IICSA documents, in the initial report, which she said had been documents quoted from the […] archives without us having sought permission from them, and she was particularly picking me up on that. And I went back and looked at that, and it was about four or five references to things that were really quite peripheral, they weren’t sensitive issues at all, and it was actually references that my co-author had put in not me at all, and with IICSA if we’d actually wanted to see that material IICSA could have just asked them for it anyway. So for them to really kick off about not having had permission sought for material that was quite tangential, that they would have had to give up anyway, just struck me as a complete over-reaction, and quite of a piece with an organisation that feels at times like they’re wanting to project an image of being very welcoming and very supportive of researchers – and I know they have done that to a number of researchers – but where actually the kind of emotional labour of dealing with them is quite hard. And so with this current project I will go back to them because there’s a particular thing that I think {...] may have misrepresented, I think there’s a particular bit in their history where I can’t reconcile at the moment something that [...] said organisationally to the Curtis Committee and what I think they actually knew at the time, and I will go back to them and clarify that. But again, the difficulty in accessing that material means that I probably won’t use much of their material for the book and probably don’t need to use a huge amount of that because there’s stuff in the National Archives that can compensate for that a bit. And then the third organisation where there have been quite difficult interactions has been the […], who hold the archives for the […], and the […] was an umbrella body that all the […] Church in England and Wales. It was a slightly odd organisation in that it didn’t exert, couldn’t exert, any managerial control over Diocesan practice but it was a kind of talking shop and a place where some kind of attempt to reach common standards seems to have been reached but where actually it had no managerial control over its constituent members. That archive is very important, both for what was happening in terms of policies of Catholic childcare in the post-war period but also for child migration as well where, to cut a long story short, the [Archbishop of Westminster Bernard Griffin], when he was Archbishop in 1946, agreed to resume Catholic child migration to Australia through contacts he had with the […], and there was a confidential meeting of the […] which agreed to do that. Which began to set plans in place for that before those had really been finalised in any detailed sense with the UK government at all, and where they were pushing ahead with that work even though they knew there had been concerns raised about […] institutions in […] Australia during the war and they’d actually promised the government that they wouldn’t send any more children before the […] in this country had done a direct inspection of those institutions, which they never did before they restarted that work. So that material, which we looked at in some detail, the minutes of the […] meetings, were very important for IICSA in terms of tracing the process by which the […] had come to involve itself in that work and in particular how it had failed to undertake any subsequent inspection or adequate monitoring of children that had been sent overseas either, but also really how centrally involved that organisation was. Also, how the [….] knew that […] officials were coming over to Britain and recruiting children directly from residential children’s homes, particular those run by the […], without the consent of Diocesan administrators. And I’m still not sure…so the […] kept telling these Australian administrators not to do that, partly I think because they wanted to maintain oversight of what was going on, but I suspect also at least in some cases because the children would actually have been under the de facto guardianship of those Diocesan administrators. Which means that if…I’m still not clear if some children were removed directly from residential institutions without the knowledge of […] administrators, whether that meant that actually they were taken without the proper consent of their de factor guardian, which would really make the legality of those migrations questionable. And that was a question that we raised in IICSA but the […] weren’t prepared to engage with that because they said that was outside of the remit of the IICSA investigation. So there’s a lot of kind of important material in the […] materials for understanding that history, and after the IICSA report had come out I then contacted the secretary to the […] asking for access to the […] minutes. And again initially they refused on the basis that it wasn’t an organised archive – and we learnt that through IICSA, that it had actually been located in at least two, I think three different locations and now it was being brought into a central archive – but what I was told initially then was that the intention was that the archive would be systematically organised in a way that it hadn’t really been done before but would then not be an open archive at all. And again that issue about GDPR exemption for researchers wasn’t mentioned or didn’t seem to be taken into account there at all. I sort of pressed on that and said how important the […] archives are for understanding post-war […] childcare more generally, whatever your kind of interest is and it would be a shame not to have issues of access and was then passed on to their archivist who again sort of explained the complexities of managing this material, because she had only just been appointed to manage this archive, she wasn’t sure what the files contained, and she wasn’t sure what the solicitors had done in terms of organising this when it had been reviewed for IICSA at all. But then said that obviously Data Protection would mean that I couldn’t see any children’s files at all, and that GDPR meant that… Because when I then went back and said that’s absolutely fine I don’t need to access children’s files for this project, I just want to see the minutes of the […], of their annual meetings, which I’d already seen for IICSA so I knew what the contents were, and I said would this be ok to do that? I sent her a page of one of those minutes that was in the public domain, because it was on the IICSA website for the hearing for that particular day, so one of the things that was running all the way through this was that I knew what the content was that I was asking for and I’d read it, and actually I’d read it and she hadn’t read it, but I couldn’t say too much about what I knew in the public domain because I was under a confidentiality agreement with IICSA, which the secretary to the […] had reminded me about when I’d first made contact with him. One of the first things he said was to remind me that I couldn’t say things in the public domain about any material that I’d seen that hadn’t come into the public domain through the IICSA hearings. So where we then got to with the archivist for that archive was she said that that might be possible, but the page that I’d sent through had referred to particular shippings that children were being sent on, not the individual names of children, but that with the transition to GDPR that meant that could be treated as an indirect marker of an individual, because she’d actually then gone on to another website that gives shipping lists for these ships and said that well if you trawled through those shipping lists for those years you could probably find the names of individuals who were sent on those ships. And I know that, at least for some of those shippings, if you went on the Australian National Archives you could get those names much more quickly on a file that’s been digitised and is available for open access already. And I was talking to another archivist who is based in Australia and who has also been significantly involved in work with child migrants over there and I mean she was saying when you think about the harm that these individuals have experienced… And actually I think a significant number of them, certainly all the ones that I’ve met, their interest is in getting transparency about the history of what went on. The idea that a very very indirect reference to the ships that they went on would actually in some way harm them, given the conditions they were sent into is ludicrous really. Again with the […] archives where we are is that it may be possible for me to get access to those minutes, at some point later on next year, if she’s had chance to go through all the archives and then see what she’s got. But again they’re making that very difficult, and again the idea of a GDPR exemption by her hasn’t been raised either. That’s been a really long answer to your question but I suppose the implication - although obviously the decision-making processes within these organisations really aren’t transparent - I think there is a nervousness about this kind of material, and I think with some organisations that’s actually far more justified than others. So for example at the moment from our understanding of the history I think there’s probably more for the […] Church to be concerned about than there is possibly for [...] or […]. But I think there’s a concern that this material will be used in a way that will damage the reputation of the organisation, and possibly lead to legal claims, and so a kind of reluctance to make that material available at all. I find that really hard to reconcile with the fact that these are all organisations that in public apologise for their involvement in the child migration programmes, and when I look at the […] Church for example I see what to me looks like a real discrepancy between their public expressions of regret and their systemic failure to look seriously at this history which runs over twenty years at least and has been criticised by people much earlier than me. That doesn’t really sit well at all, and I think creates a kind of air of bad faith around the whole process really.

**Victoria**

And I think perhaps there’s something to be learned from some, not all but some, of the Australian organisations who I think through the Royal Commission process have embraced transparency in their recordkeeping and their archive processes, as part of their kind of recompense process, and to demonstrate the sincerity of their apology and to own the mistakes of the past and historical injustices rather than to try and manage a risk of further damage to their reputation. It sounds as though that’s perhaps one of the primary motives that you’re encountering at the moment?

**G404**

Yes, that’s my impression, and I think generally IICSA…I think the panel with the Child Migration report did a very good job. There were perhaps some points I might have emphasised a little bit more than them and I might have wanted a bit more pressure to be put on voluntary organisations but one of the things that I do regret is that their recommendation about archive access was just for individual case records and to be honest I don’t think…because that issue about access to individual records really came up in the 1997-98 Health Committee report I think, by and large, organisations have been retaining what records they have and cataloguing those for individuals, so I don’t think that’s actually been a huge problem. More of a problem for many child migrants is actually the state of the records, the conditions they’ve been in. Some of the children sent over from […], […] historically had very very poor standards in terms of supporting former child migrants in terms of their access to case records – if you want me to talk a bit more about that I can do. But I regret the fact that IICSA didn’t make exactly the point that you’ve just made, that there is a wider kind of public interest and I think a wider interest for those organisations as well in terms of being transparent about the past, owning that history.

**Victoria**

Yes, yeah, and I know that, as you say, the only specific recommendations around recordkeeping that IICSA has made thus far is in access for individuals. I think that was made quite strongly and I know that…I can recognise the urgency of that recommendation in terms of the individuals who are involved, many of whom are elderly or in ill health, but there was suggestion in the general interim report that there would be broader recommendations around recordkeeping but that was quite non-specific in contrast to the other recommendation, and I suppose we have wondered within the research team why that might be. Because I think perhaps the legislative framework as it currently stands appears to be comprehensive but is in ways quite limited. So you’ve mentioned GDPR and the Data Protection exemption for research, but in your experience that’s not being highlighted or well used?

**G404**

Oh no, not at all. I mean, part of it is I have to say… because my sort of disciplinary background has really been in sociology and cultural sociology I’ve come to archive research quite late, so I’ve really been catching up in terms of understanding some issues such as Data Protection, obviously the shift to GDPR as well. So I think part of the problem for me as a researcher is I just really wasn’t up to speed with things like the GDPR exemption, or very confident in terms of how to push with that. But absolutely there’s been…no, I mean there’s been no reference to it. Any archive which has been difficult about access has never mentioned that at all, and I suppose the thing about the GDPR exemption is that it’s permissive, it allows organisations if they want to to give access in a way that might touch on sensitive material but they can still refuse to do that if they judge it not to be appropriate in terms of organisational interest. Obviously most of this material falls outside of Freedom of Information as well, so FOI doesn’t actually…I did end up putting an FOI request in for material that was held in the Parliamentary Library, in the House of Commons library, which was evidence that had been submitted by individual child migrants to the 1997-98 Health Committee report. That was really a good experience, of them explaining that they felt, in terms of the limits of FOI, I could press to have that material or access to some of that material, but that they really needed for Data Protection reasons to go through and redact identifying information or information that could be considered protected under Data Protection legislation and that to do that for 300 letters was just going to be…the public interest in terms of what I was doing just wasn’t strong enough to demand the amount of time it would take for one of their staff. But what they then did was they did a sample for me so that I could see the kind of content that came up and they just allowed me to pick the file references to that, so that felt like a fairly transparent process. Because people’s names…the institutions they were sent to were relevant, but you could still get a sense of what the content was and that actually was enough in terms of what I needed from that exercise, so it felt like… where archivists want to be helpful they are prepared to engage in a sensible process of negotiation, I felt we had that with the House of Commons library, but with voluntary organisations they can just say no and then you end up with this kind of public expression of regret alongside a kind of failure, I think, to give proper recompense to historical memory in the way that you’re talking about.

**Victoria**

If you could advise IICSA on a recommendation for access to records for research purposes is there anything…are there any specific criteria or requirements that you would suggest?

**G404**

I don’t know how practical this is because this is very…obviously we’re now getting quite far outside of my competence but I do feel that the ability of organisations to control archives around historic abuse is simply not…you just can’t operate sensibly on that basis. Just to take a step back from that, to explain partly why I think that and why we learnt that with the child migration inquiries. There have been different examples where organisations have given evidence to earlier inquiries or reports which subsequent investigation of their archives has shown to be simply incorrect or untrue. So for example in Australia the Christian Brothers as part of a Catholic Church submission to a Senate community affairs report in 2001 said that as far as they were aware the Christian Brothers had operated within the kind of law of the time in terms of reporting sexual abuse, but then when the Royal Commission actually got access to Christian Brothers visitation books and kind of provincial council minutes it became clear that the Christian Brothers in Australia had been aware of instances of sexual abuse of children at institutions they ran, including all of the ones to which child migrants were sent in Western Australia, for each of the decades from the 1920s I think to the 1970s. I can’t…I think there was one case where there was a police investigation but I don’t think that was triggered by them, and I can’t think of any cases in which they reported those cases to the police at all. So the Brother who’d actually given that original evidence in 2001 had to admit that his evidence in 2001 - when he came before the Royal Commission - had been incorrect. Similarly the Director of the Fairbridge Society, when he gave oral evidence to the 97-98 Health Committee investigation, said that he thought the claims of abuse of children in Fairbridge farm schools overseas had been overblown and was whipped up by a kind of media frenzy, and also later said that there was no evidence of any knowledge of child abuse in the Fairbridge archives, and again when that was looked at by an independent researcher called David Hill and by IICSA again it’s clear that there were concerns about people within… with actually some staff being dismissed for concerns around kind of child abuse there. So again a kind of organisational self-representation that was simply untrue. And similarly with IICSA the Sisters of Nazareth told the Historical Institutional Abuse inquiry that they became involved in child migration programmes in response to an invitation from the UK government and again we found that was completely untrue, that the UK government really weren’t aware of where these children were being recruited from in 1946 when the Sisters of Nazareth were already getting their kind of migration forms ready to be sent down to Australia House. I think there’s something very unsatisfactory about specifically kind of inquiries and reports that rely on organisational representation of their archives. That can be problematic because unless you’re very very well resourced you may have to rely on that to a certain extent, but I think without sort of independent access to those archives…I think that’s very problematic. So I think organisations can’t be trusted to just police their own control of those records, and I also think…sorry this is turning into quite a long answer…but I also think that where archives are just made available for inquiries and then subsequently closed… So I’ve worked quite closely with people who have been involved with work around the Magdalene laundries in Ireland and there’s a lot of unhappiness there around the McAleese report which received archival material from religious orders that had run Magdalene institutions, and reviewed them in a report whose findings were quite contentious about the kind of exploitation of labour. And what the McAleese report claimed was that there was lack of evidence of abuse of women in those institutions, but where there was no independent scrutiny of the archives they’d been given at all. And in that sense inquiries can actually… if they’re not very rigorous in their methodology, or they don’t appear to be credible in their degree of critical analysis of that material, can actually add to the kind of closure of historical memory because they lead to a sense of well this material has been reviewed, and it gives legitimacy to organisations continuing to refuse further access. So I think what I’d really like to see is a more general principle – and I don’t know how far this could be extended but certainly for organisations involved in historic childcare - where a researcher, a bona-fide researcher, is doing a project, where there is a public interest in terms of access to material, then perhaps that should be taken out of the control of the organisations to decide whether the GDPR exemption could be applied in that case, whether that be someone like the Information Commissioner who might decide that. But it doesn’t feel right that organisations that may be sitting on material that reveals kind of significant problems can actually police that and prevent access to that, when I think it’s often independent researchers, academic researchers, going in and looking at that material that actually generates a public awareness of problems in relation to that case that can actually lead to inquiries in the first place. Like in Ireland it was precisely the work that Mary Raftery and Eoin O’Sullivan did in terms of having access to, I think particularly, Department of Education files there for their work with Suffer the Little Children book and the accompanying RTE programme. That was really instrumental in getting the Ryan commission set up. So I think if we don’t give some kind of right of access to researchers I think we’re actually…we’re not really helping a sort of open review of cases of historic abuse, in a way that certainly doesn’t serve people who were affected by that. I don’t think it serves the public interest in terms of having an open and kind of balanced and informed understanding of what’s gone wrong organisationally in the past and how proper amends could be made for that. But I don’t think it actually does good for the organisations either, because I think it just leaches cynicism into society when you have a sense that organisations who continue claiming to represent the good and to be acting on a kind of moral basis, and often with religious organisations trying to take a moral stand on issues, that actually they’re doing this at the same time as sitting on very difficult histories that they’re not prepared to look properly at. Where theological notions of repentance, which seem very much central to their moral cultures, don’t actually seem to be applied effectively to their own institutional practices. So, I mean I don’t know how practical that is but unless we get to a point where researchers can have some recourse to an independent body who would allow that to be done… I think that would be really important. The other thing I wonder about with this – and I do sympathise with organisations who hold these archives – but there’s a big difference between going to someone like [...] or the […] archives where there’s actually a kind of reading guide, you can see what the kind of range of material is that’s held there and you can then ask questions about what you can access or not access within that, and other organisations that don’t do that, where you get in touch with an archivist and it’s a bit like they say I’ll have a look around the back and see what we’ve got for you. I’ve done that with one religious order, the […], who were involved in more than one institution that accommodated child migrants but certainly one that’s been the subject of child abuse inquiries in the past, and I’ve asked them about any material they might hold that would help me to understand not only their involvement in child migration work but more generally, in its wider sense, just the religious ethos of the organisation at the time, to understand their kind of rationale for this and I think they sent me back three or pages of PDF files which was just relating to kind of how they managed the allocation of child benefit to child migrants. I just cannot believe that’s all they’ve got there, but when archives…when there’s no kind of comprehensive cataloguing of the archive you’re then having to take it on trust from archivists that that’s all there is and increasingly my experience leads me not to trust archivists unfortunately in many cases and to presume that possibly something is being hidden there. So I think the other thing that runs alongside GDPR exemptions is that if archives aren’t effectively managed, and we don’t actually have kind of oversight of what’s actually held there, actually even if you have that exemption it means that with some organisations you won’t always get to important material because you won’t know actually what you’re asking for, and the archivist can still exert some control there. So I guess it would be both of those things, but I don’t know how practical those would be, perhaps the first might be easier to achieve than the second I think.

**Victoria**

Yeah, I mean certainly there would be resourcing issues. But there are models, for example within access to health and medical records for research. In those fields there are independent panels that adjudicate research requests and liaise with university’s ethical processes in ways that are not currently available for access to child social care records. And it’s becoming a very salient issue not only for historical researchers, sociology researchers, but also for researchers within the fields of social work and social policy who are looking perhaps at more aggregated quantitative data and active data about the provision of children’s services today. So I think there’s certainly demand for it, it’s whether or not there’s sufficient will to drive it forward. But I think you’re absolutely right that the first might be easier than the second, in the sense that it could be centrally implemented, whereas the individual kind of archival processing of collections is very challenging although I know in Australia again that the government centrally funds the Find and Connect service which itself gives grants to organisations to catalogue and manage their records. Yeah, there are certainly models. It’s very very difficult and this issue of transparency is quite complex and differently motivated in different organisations, but it’s very hard to understand without…if you don’t know what somebody might have then it’s very difficult to ask them to be transparent about it.

**G404**

Yes, that’s right. I mean that’s actually changing my practice a little bit now because [information on scope of forthcoming research removed]. I now know what I’ll do with that is try and get as much as I can from the National Archives [information on scope of forthcoming research removed] because I think organisations if they’re wanting to cover things up simply won’t tell you. They’re not going to volunteer information at all. And I suppose that first thing about having a kind of independent scrutiny of applications for access to records I don’t get any sense that any voluntary organisation is going to push for that. But it is… increasingly I think if we’re going to deal with these issues properly and openly, I think that has to be done really, and perhaps going back to IICSA and trying to push for that to be addressed more as an issue I think would be something that would be very welcome.

**Victoria**

Certainly we hope there will be opportunities to have conversations with IICSA about these issues, and we know that they are interested in recordkeeping but as I say the sense from the interim report is that they recognise multiple sensitivities around this area. Just before we move on from these questions of ethics and access, I wanted to ask a little bit about internal university procedures for accessing these records and whether or not you’ve been subjected to internal scrutiny from your organisation about how you intend to access and use records of child social care?

**G404**

No, because our university ethics policy relates to human participants but also records around individuals and sort of data management, and the project that I’m doing for the AHRC fellowship is really much more about processes, so I’m not actually writing about individuals at all. If I come across tangentially details about any individuals through files I would only be thinking about that in terms of what that revealed about more general operational principles at the time, so actually in terms of the formal ethics procedures I’ve not had to make an ethics application for this. Although interestingly – I’m not sure how relevant it is for your project – I have just got in touch with our ethics committee to start discussion with them because I’ve been in touch with a centre in Australia that provides support for former child migrants and former residents of Christian Brothers’ institutions in Western Australia and they’ve done a little publicity piece about my project and I’ve actually had three or four people get in touch with me about that, former child migrants wanting to talk about my research. At first I wasn’t quite sure what those conversations would be about but it actually became clear, now that I’ve had a couple of them, that it’s partly people wanting to talk about their own experiences in ways that can involve often very difficult material around kind of family separation, organisational duplicity, sexual and physical abuse, exploitation of labour to significant detriment to an individual’s education, really quite hard things. But where for these individuals I think they’ve lived with those stories for so long and I think they’ve had other chances to talk about them, they’re not quite so raw as if they were being spoken about for the first time, but because I’m not using that material I’ve gone back to our central ethics board and said kind of what do I do about this? Because I’m not using this material directly for my research but it is potentially sensitive material that people are telling me about, and so what we’ve agreed is I’m just going to wrote a letter to my Faculty ethics committee explaining what my project is and explaining the nature of these contacts and how I would deal with things like participants…well they’re not participants… stakeholders, who are disclosing information that is potentially distressing, support for that, disclosures around criminal acts, and kind of recordkeeping which all seems fine and sensible. But I don’t…otherwise the main project has fallen outside of university ethics procedures but I think it wouldn’t have done if I’d been doing a project that was more focused around kind of review of children’s abuse allegations and analysis of those.

**Victoria**

You’ve pre-empted one of my final questions there in terms of contact, having any contact with individuals who are either subjects of records or who have a personal emotional stake in them. Obviously during the IICSA process you will have been aware of or had contact with witnesses whose records you may also have seen, and one of the areas of particular concern for us is how we can strike a balance between access for research and the privacy or information rights of care experienced people. There’s an eternal question really in historical studies in terms of how you adequately represent historical abuse, particularly where those individuals may be living and have divergent opinions, experiences, to the records which have been used to produce historical work. And I just wondered if you had any thoughts about how that kind of balance might be achieved?

**G404**

Yeah, that’s really difficult. I’m not sure if this will…I’m just going to talk about an example but I’m not sure if it will be absolutely bang on for the interests of your project because it’s not so much about case records, although I think it has resonances with that. [Example removed to preserve the anonymity and privacy of an individual.] Because I think particularly for former child migrants where there are really serious issues about dislocation of identity, particularly for people who were sent overseas maybe and their names changed in that process or with very poor records about their family backgrounds, that sense of who they are or what happened to them is a really almost existential issue I think. I think sometimes people take hold of stories to make sense of that experience which aren’t historically true, although I think actually a lot of the ways the child migrants do make sense of that with varying degrees of detail are right actually, but there are cases where people do that in a way that isn’t historically right, and I think ethically that’s quite hard in terms of what you do. Not wanting to challenge a story that someone has that may be important for them for reasons that aren’t just about historical understanding, and I think in that case it’s not always about doing the best history in a kind of academic sense. I think it’s about recognising that there are other kinds of narratives that people are wanting to tell and if you’re trying to change that at all or just present alternatives that has to be done in a very kind of gentle way. I think what I’ve found in my…some of the conversations I’ve had with child migrants I think the dynamic is very much that they want to tell me their story and their actually not that curious about what I know in terms of wider organisational policy. So I know for some of them who were sent by Catholic organisations a bit more about the policy decisions that were being made around that and some of the kind of problems with that, but I’m not sure how important that knowledge is for them really. And I think having more of the kind of recognition of their stories is important. But just going back to your original question I think, I suppose the way I come to these issues are through this very particular project where, by and large, former child migrants, some - depending on the organisation and place that people were sent to - some would recount more positive accounts of their experiences, and sometimes that can be about people genuinely having more positive experiences and sometimes it can be about the way in which people protect themselves from difficult emotions and kind of make the best of kind of bad situations, but for many former child migrants they already have a sense of organisations being dishonest, of not being trustworthy, of the government not sort of taking responsibility for its actions, so I think for them they really actually quite like to see research brought to bear, particularly when it’s validating their concerns, which I think certainly through IICSA we found by and large it very much did. I think I can understand that for another kind of research which might be about a sort of say an academic interest in terms of policy development in a particular area where the kind of questions being pursued simply wouldn’t feel that interesting or significant to those people who’d been in care, then I think that is a harder issue then about balancing individuals kind of rights to information. Even then, with the GDPR exemptions, I think that should provide adequate protections for individuals there, but I think for the work that I’ve been doing, when it’s essentially providing…I mean the expert witness material we provided very much underpinned the IICSA recommendation of the government redress scheme being set up, so I think people when they’re actually benefiting and its validating concerns that they’ve had about the past, and actually showing that organisational claims that everything was ok weren’t correct, I think that runs much more with the kind of grain of what people in care in this context would like to see done. Many of them won’t have differences with that. Sorry that’s a kind of rambling response to that.

**Victoria**

No, thank you, as with all your responses it’s been very illuminating and thoughtful. I think that is all of my questions. Is there anything that you would like to add on at the end, anything that you haven’t had an opportunity to say that you would like to?

**G404**

I think… no. I think it’s really helpful and I think it’s really useful to think about how this could be taken forward as well. Perhaps IICSA potentially could be a very useful vehicle for that, although possibly not the only one. I think it does, I suppose probably - just ending on a personal note - I think it does…it’s changed my view of both my academic work and the kind of questions that I want to pursue in the future and also some of the organisations that I’m working with as well. Where I think I was willing in the past to assume some kind of good faith on these organisations behalf and the decisions that they were making about access to information, that they really were being made primarily on the basis of protecting kind of individuals’ information. And I think having come to be…not because I had a particular axe to grind about those organisations originally, but having just actually seen their practices, I think that as a researcher leaves you in quite a difficult place, in kind of holding that kind of knowledge of the discrepancy between the public face of the organisation and their actual practices, and what you then do with that. Because it’s hard for that then not to kind of shape the entire way you then think about your work. So I suppose I’m beginning to think now about debates more widely about transitional justice and there’s – sorry I haven’t mentioned this to you before – but I’m going to go to a conference in Boston at the start of November, which I’m looking forward to, which is looking at how ideas of transitional justice might be useful for reconfiguring the study of 20th century Irish history, where there’s obviously been a kind of nexus of institutional involvement between the church and the state which has led to institutions being allowed to practice in ways that has been significantly abusive towards a wide range of different people, particularly children and vulnerable women. And I think that…I suppose it’s changing the way I think about engaging with the study of the past and I think about it now not simply as a process of academic history but actually seeing the kind of questions you’re asking and what it is you’re kind of pushing for in terms of archives access as trying to encourage some kind of appropriate redress. So I think that feels like that’s becoming more of an encompassing project now, and I think kind of when you’ve seen the problems with that it’s quite hard to let those go as issues, and so I think finding like-minded researchers – because the nature of the work can be quite isolated often, because you’re working in particular specialisms in which not many other people share that area of interest – but I think to probably network with other researchers who struggle with these issues I think – and to understand what good practice would really mean in a way that balances public interest but also really genuinely rigorous academic work and genuinely rigorous historical research as well, I think is a very valuable thing as well. So yeah, I think apart from that that’s kind of everything I’ve been thinking about.

**Victoria**

Thank you very much. I’m going to stop recording us, that will be the end of the formal interview.

**END OF INTERVIEW**