

---

6-1-2006

## Contextualising the Research Process: Using Interviewer Notes in the Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data

John Goodwin

*Centre for Labour Market Studies, jdg3@le.ac.uk*

Henrietta O'Connor

*Centre for Labour Market Studies*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended APA Citation

Goodwin, J., & O'Connor, H. (2006). Contextualising the Research Process: Using Interviewer Notes in the Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data. *The Qualitative Report*, 11(2), 374-392. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2006.1679>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---



**Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate**  
*Indulge in Culture*  
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits  
**LEARN MORE**

NSU  
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN  
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

## Contextualising the Research Process: Using Interviewer Notes in the Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data

### Abstract

In this paper we argue that for the secondary analysis of qualitative data to be effective, researchers need to subject any accompanying interviewer notes to the secondary analysis process. The secondary analysis of interviewer notes can provide important insight into the research process and the attitudes, experiences, and expectations of those collecting the data. Such information is essential if meaningful analyses are to be offered. Using interviewer notes from a little known research project on youth transitions from the 1960s, this paper explores how the interviewers' experiences of the research process and their perceptions are documented in the interviewer notes.

### Keywords

Interviewer Notes, Secondary Analysis, Qualitative Data, Research Process, Interviews, Recording Data, Representations of Respondents, and Sources of Bias

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### Acknowledgements

This paper is part of an ESRC project, From Young Workers to Older Workers: Reflections on Work in the Life Course (R000223653). We would like to thank Ronald Chenail and the reviewers for their useful comments.

## **Contextualising the Research Process: Using Interviewer Notes in the Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data**

**John Goodwin and Henrietta O'Connor**

Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester, United Kingdom

---

*In this paper we argue that for the secondary analysis of qualitative data to be effective, researchers need to subject any accompanying interviewer notes to the secondary analysis process. The secondary analysis of interviewer notes can provide important insight into the research process and the attitudes, experiences, and expectations of those collecting the data. Such information is essential if meaningful analyses are to be offered. Using interviewer notes from a little known research project on youth transitions from the 1960s, this paper explores how the interviewers' experiences of the research process and their perceptions are documented in the interviewer notes. Key Words: Interviewer Notes, Secondary Analysis, Qualitative Data, Research Process, Interviews, Recording Data, Representations of Respondents, and Sources of Bias*

---

### **Introduction**

Whilst the value of educational and sociological researchers undertaking secondary analysis of qualitative data has been well recognised (see Corti 1998; Corti, Day, & Backhouse, 2000; Corti, Foster, & Thompson, 1995; Heaton, 1998; Thompson, 2000), it remains a relatively uncommon aspect of social enquiry (Fielding, 2000). Yet, secondary analysis data has a number of benefits for the researcher, not least of which is that secondary analysis of qualitative data opens up the possibility of exploring current themes and debates via data that was collected in the past (Goodwin & O'Connor, 2003). Currently, we are undertaking a secondary analysis of over eight hundred school to work interview schedules in order to re-examine experiences of the transition from school to work in the early 1960s (Goodwin & O'Connor, 2002). The interview schedules we are analysing come from Norbert Elias's unknown *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* project. This project was completed by researchers at the University of Leicester, between 1962 and 1964, with a sample of young people who left Leicester schools in the summer and Christmas of 1960 and 1962.

On completion of the original project, the interview schedules were archived at the University of Leicester. Almost forty years later, in 2001, we accessed the archive and the interview schedules, and sought permission to carry out a restudy. Permission was granted by the University of Leicester, the surviving members of the original research team and the funding body. Although members of the original research team were known to us, neither of us had any involvement in the original phase of the research. However, the original research team were keen for us to explore the data given the difficult circumstances surrounding the end of the research (see Goodwin & O'Connor,

2002), and their desire to see the data put to good use. On the basis of the archived data a new grant was then secured, enabling us to carry out a restudy using the 1960s interview schedules. In the new grant application a consideration of the ethical issues surrounding such a study was provided and approved.

Although the secondary analysis is proving fruitful, in order to fully understand and meaningfully interpret the data on youth transitions, we have had to re-examine the research and data collection processes as documented in the extensive interviewer notes that accompanied the interview schedule. In these interviewer notes, the interviewers were urged by Elias to comment on their impressions of the interview, in particular the attitude of respondents, the atmosphere of the interview, and any problems connected with work, family, or leisure. The interviewers also used the interviewer notes to record their own reflections, opinions, and experiences of the research process as *they* experienced it. It is not unusual for such observations and experiences to be recorded in interviewer notes. However, as Wolfinger (2002) suggests, irrespective of any strategies for note taking, the interviewer's own experiences, knowledge, and expectations are highly significant in determining which observations and data are written up in subsequent analysis and transcription.

In this article we argue that if the secondary analysis of educational or sociological data is to be effective, researchers need to have full access to any accompanying interviewer notes and subject those notes to the same secondary analysis process. We suggest this for three main reasons. First, interviewer notes provide essential contextual information required for the secondary analysis of the data. Second, the interviewer notes provide a rare insight into the experiences of those collecting data in the field. Third, a secondary analysis of the interviewer notes may reveal factors that could have affected the data collection process. Without attempting to understand the thoughts, feelings, ideas, and experiences of the interviewer it would be difficult (if not impossible) for the secondary analyst to fully understand the data. For example, those in the field may have "over emphasised" the factors in which they were interested in and without access to the interview notes this may go unnoticed. A similar view is offered by Fielding (2000),

Primary data analysis is always subject to the problem that researchers will have entered the field and collected their data with particular interests in mind....This is probably more often an implicit or unwitting process, but this actually makes the problem worse, since the primary researcher may sincerely believe that such processes have not been at work and so may be blind to their effects...Secondary analysis may have a legitimate claim to greater plausibility since it is less likely that the analytic interests which are employed will have played a part in the interactional field from which the data were derived. (p. 21)

The paper is organised in three main sections. Following the introduction, we consider the methodological and ethical issues that a secondary analysis of interviewer notes suggests. We then present data from the interviewer notes to explore the interviewers' experiences of data collection for the *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* project, and to examine how the researchers' preoccupations with social class, income and wealth, the home environment, the physical appearance of the respondent, and respondent's family and friends may have affected the research

process. We then conclude the paper by reflecting on the importance of secondary analysis for educational and sociological research.

### Using Interviewer Notes as Qualitative Secondary Data

The secondary analyst has an anonymized, ready-made dataset that requires none of the moral considerations that are a constant worry for the qualitative researcher carrying out interviews in the field. (Dale, Arber, & Proctor, 1998, p. 56)

As we have suggested above, our argument in this paper is that in order for secondary analysis to be effective the researcher needs to have a clear understanding of the process through which the data was collected. Dale et al. (1988) in their discussion of secondary analysis support this view and argue that the analysis of qualitative data involves not only an analysis of the data *per se*, but also an understanding of the process through which the data was collected, and the interactions that took place during this process. Central to understanding the process are the accounts written in interviewer notes and produced by researchers whilst in the field. However, with the exception of Wolfinger (2002) there are very few discussions as to how researchers' experiences are documented in interviewer notes, and considerations that offer a secondary analysis of interviewer notes are fewer still. There could be a number of reasons for this including the methodological and ethical issues surrounding secondary analysis *per se* or, as others suggest, the fact that many qualitative data sets and accompanying interview notes have simply been lost or destroyed, leaving little opportunity for such secondary analysis to take place (Corti et al., 1995; Hammersley, 1997, p. 137). Despite the trend towards the archiving of qualitative materials, the loss of data may have been accelerated in recent years with the greater emphasis placed on ethical usage and the stricter enforcement of data protection legislation. In many countries legislation and ethical guidelines demand the destruction of data at a given point in time after the completion of the research. The loss and destruction of qualitative data and interviewer notes aside, however, we do feel that it is important to consider the methodological and ethical concerns that such an approach suggests. There are three broad concerns relating to confidentiality and anonymity, the nature of qualitative research, and the problem of "auditing."

First, in qualitative research the researcher who is responsible for data collection is usually also responsible for writing interviewer notes and analysing the data (Dale et al., 1988). During the research process the original researcher would have provided guarantees as to how the data will be used and given assurances relating to anonymity, and to how the respondents will be represented. Indeed Corti et al. (1995) found that a main concern with secondary analysis relates to the promises made to respondents regarding confidentiality. Additionally, it is possible that the respondents only revealed certain information because of the relationship they had developed with the original researchers. No such relationship exists with later researchers, and those who are undertaking the secondary analysis of the data may be unaware of any of the assurances that were given. Such issues are compounded when the secondary analysis process also involves an analysis of accompanying interviewer notes. Problems arise in that the interviewer notes not only contain confidential information about the respondents, but also reveal much about the interviewers. As such the secondary analyst has to be concerned about maintaining anonymity and confidentiality for both the researcher and

the researched, and be mindful that the data contained within the interviewer notes was perhaps never intended for secondary analysis. However, Corti et al. (1995) do suggest that a number of steps can be taken to preserve the confidentiality of the research material. Such measures include having a closure period for the material, specifying restricted access to the material so that usage can be vetted, and that the data is anonymized and all personal identifiers are removed. It is also essential that permissions to use the interviewer notes are sought from the original research team.

A second concern for the secondary analyst is that in qualitative approaches the researcher often *becomes* the research instrument (Dale et al., 1998). Here the researcher cannot be separated from the data or interviewer notes and as such one must question the ability of a secondary researcher to re-analyse the data. In the case of the secondary analysis of interviewer notes, the notes may only provide an incomplete picture of the data collection process or as Dale et al. suggest “in these circumstances it seems unlikely that the re-analysis of either interview transcripts or field-notes by an outsider could give more than a partial understanding of the research issues” (p.15). Yet despite these concerns, the secondary analysis of qualitative data and interviewer notes has much to offer the educational and social researcher including the discovery and examination of additional examination of themes, issues, concepts, or ideas (Bloor & Macintosh, 1990; Hinds, Vogel, & Clarke-Steffen, 1997). Heaton (1998), cited in Fielding (2000), suggests three analytic approaches “additional in-depth analysis; additional analysis of a sub-set of the original data; or to apply a new perspective or a new conceptual focus” (Fielding, 2000, p. 16). Likewise, it is not unusual for more than one person to be involved in data collection and analysis. As such, the relationship between respondent and researcher may not be an insurmountable problem for the secondary analyst. As Heaton (1998) argues, whilst one of the limitations with secondary analysis of qualitative data may be the inter-subjective relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee: It is often the case that more than one researcher was involved in the generation of the data.

A final concern is raised by Hammersley (1997), who suggests that the secondary analysis process may lead to an “auditing” of social research, raising ethical problems for the researcher as well as the researched. Hammersley suggests that “the audit model could be taken to imply that the efficiency and competence of researchers can be assessed on the basis of archived material” (Hammersley, p. 136). Corti et al. (1995) also report that researchers are concerned about secondary analysis due to the possible methodological criticisms that could be made of the original research. Again when the secondary analysis process also involves an analysis of interviewer notes these issues are further compounded. In the majority of cases researchers produce interviewer notes for themselves and not for consumption by others and, therefore, making such notes available secondary analysts must heighten concerns about judgments being made regarding the efficiency and competence of the original researchers. However, Corti et al. (1995) also suggest that “whilst this concern is understandable, it is probable that secondary users will be more interested in using data for their own specific research rather than replicating the original analysis” (p.3). More simply, the intention of most secondary analysis is not to highlight the flaws in the original analysis or to pinpoint any problems with research design or implementation in the field, instead the concern is more with using the data to explore new ideas.

For the current research, the above discussion raises a number of issues that need to be considered. Dealing with Hammersley's (1997) concern first, it is indeed not our intention to produce an audit of "the efficiency and competence of researchers," nor is it our intention to imply in any way that the original research design was incorrect or invalid. A replication of the study, or a re-testing of the findings (in so much as most of the data was never originally analysed), is also beyond our concerns. Our concern is more about understanding the data collection process and examining the original research context and any factors that may have affected it. Indeed, without undertaking a secondary analysis of background material, such as the interviewer notes, it would be impossible to fully understand the context of the research or the data collection process and its attendant problems. In terms of confidentiality, the historical location of this data affords us the closure period that Corti et al. (1995) suggest. In 2004 the majority of this data was over forty years old. In usage terms, we are well beyond the current practice at the UK Public Record Office (2001), which opens files for public inspection after thirty years (unless there are specific reasons not to do so). Furthermore, in order to obtain permission to use the data (and to offer reassurances about the purpose of this research), members of the original research team were contacted. Finally, in order to understand the research process more fully we have discussed the secondary analysis with the original research team. The original research team were also present when some of the data from the interviewer notes were presented at a conference. Being able to discuss the research with the original research team was advantageous, as they were able to provide background material, offer insights into the research process, and comment upon our interpretations.

We now move on to look at the themes emerging from the interviewer notes, focusing initially on how the interview process was documented. Particular attention is given to the researchers' experiences of using "technology" in the field, access issues, and the problems of collecting interview data. Following this, the discussion explores how the respondents were represented in the interviewer notes. We pay particular attention to representations of physical appearance and clothing, personality and intelligence, and employment status, reflecting on the impacts that these may have had on the data collection process.

### **Representations of the Interview Process in Interviewer Notes**

A great deal of insight into the research process can be gleaned from interviewer notes. The value of such insights is well made by Fielding (2000) in that these accounts document the lived realities of social research and clearly contrasts with the logical, smooth, rational, and "perfect" research process described in many textbooks. Interviewer notes provide "case material for teaching, and methodological development, where researchers' own diaries, logs, memos and notes can offer insight into the process of the fieldwork in a way which is seldom forthcoming from methods textbooks" (Fielding, 2000, p. 16).

One of the most significant technological advances in social research since its inception must be the ability for those working in the field to systematically and faithfully record the words of the respondents using audio-tape or (more recently) digital media. Such an approach allows the researcher to replay and reflect on the interview without

relying solely on field notes. It also means the authenticity of the data can be maintained. Most methodological textbooks would recommend the recording of interview data for that very reason. However, not many texts actually reflect on the problems that technology may impose on the researcher. Yet, in practice the process of recording an interview may not be so straightforward. Problems may include respondents not agreeing to the recording, respondents adapting their answers for tape, or technological breakdown. The latter issue was certainly true in the present research. The original interview team have recounted how in the *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* project large reel-to-reel tape recorders were used to commit the responses to tape, and initially, they were used with seemingly good effect. "We find each interview leaves quite a vivid impression, different from the next one, and it is hard to see general patterns at this stage. We are getting very good results with tape recorders." (Riddell, Keil, & Green, 1963, p. 2)

However, whilst the researchers were initially able to obtain good results with the tape recorders the field notes revealed that the process of recording the interviews was not always straightforward and was often beset by technical problems.

"Tape recorder was used, but a flaw in tape recorder caused a distortion, but managed to write up most of the material although the last 1/3rd of the schedules responses were based on memory as the tape went so slow and then very fast that it was impossible to decipher the interview. Any inaccuracy very slight as I wrote it up shortly after he interview."

"Tape recorder failed to record this interview which was written up next day from memory."

"A tape recorder was used for this interview but unfortunately it was not recording. As a result the schedule has been written completely from memory. Because of this, it was very fortunate that the respondent had only had one job and that she had been to no classes, clubs or associations."

From the interviewer notes, it is clear that the researchers experienced real difficulties with the tape recorder. The recorder either failed to work or would fail to record. What we also see is a glimpse of the problems caused by human error (i.e., when the tape recorder is mistakenly not switched on or the problems of having to write up the interview notes from memory). What also becomes all too apparent is the sense of frustration with the technology.

"Bloody tape recorder didn't record again - but could remember almost every word - wrote it up same evening."

Interestingly, the tape recorders also generated some unexpected interaction between the researchers and the young people being interviewed. Indeed, from some of the interviews it is clear that the respondents had as much, if not more, technological ability as the researchers.

"The tape stopped after 5 questions - respondent kindly fixed it."

“[He] had less to say than I thought he would have. He used his own little tape recorder for a bit it wasn’t very good.”

Whilst technology was frequently problematic for the interviewer, the respondents themselves could also cause problems, and another key feature of the interviews seems to be that the researchers faced a certain amount of hostility. As suggested above, the original researchers were asked to indicate whether the interviewee was hostile, indifferent, or friendly, and similarly reflect on whether the atmosphere surrounding the interview was poor, moderate, or good. The researchers reported that of the 851 interviews, 15 interviewees were hostile and 139 were indifferent. In terms of atmosphere, 50 interview situations were described as poor, with 219 being recorded as moderate. Part of the hostility may have in fact been due to the “reality” of undertaking this kind of research in the field with respondents who are just not interested. As suggested above, the interviews were undertaken in the respondent’s home after they had returned home from work. It is conceivable that the respondents had no interest in answering questions, or speaking to the researchers, after what had been (for them) a full working day. After a day at work the respondents may just have wanted to spend their leisure time in a way that suited them.

Appointment had been made by Mother (after Father had made a mistake in the shift respondent was working). Respondent was alone when I called and seemed to have made up his mind to say no. Talked round the subject, told him about the project and the content of the schedule and he said he would answer if I did it quickly as he wanted to continue mending his bike...and in any case was waiting for someone to call round. He refused to let me use the tape recorder and stood over me in a very hostile way as I asked the questions and noted the answers.

However, in other situations the hostility shown by the respondents to the research increased when other family members or friends were present during the interview.

Respondent was indifferent to take interview at first and positively hostile towards the end when his father was present. He left the room immediately, Father started to ask me questions about the research and returned only to see me out. The interview was the shortest I have ever done - 25 minutes tape - but even that seemed too long to hold the boys interest.

“Father was rather critical of the project, and it was only after lengthy persuasion that he finally agreed to the interview being conducted.”

“Parents entered at about Q65 and were, especially the father, vividly hostile. Tried hard to intervene and spoil interview atmosphere which had been good up to then. Boy became more cautious with his answers.”

More problematic than mere hostility, it is clear that the presence of family members and friends during the interview ensured that some respondents either did not answer the questions fully or that they adapted their answers to become more “acceptable” to those present.

Mother was quiet at first, positively hostile when I began to ask questions about the family and I am convinced she indicated to Respondent (she was standing behind me) to refuse to answer. I explained again and again but she was not reassured and we missed out the money/home questions.

I first talked to respondent’s father who was very difficult. He scrutinised the schedule. It took me nearly 45 minutes to convince him that I had no ulterior motive...The respondent was told by his father not to answer anything he didn’t want to. Respondent obviously didn’t want to be interviewed at all. He refused to answer 2 questions for no obvious reasons I could see apart from bloody mindedness.

The mother didn’t help at the start of the interview by saying “I shouldn’t find \*\*\*\* easy to talk to, he was a funny lad,” this in front of him. His younger sister’s also kept poking fun at him during the course of the interview, because of some of the words he used e.g. bloke, owt and nowt, and his younger brother was the cause of quite a bit of embarrassment to his mother (not to me).

“A very subdued and inarticulate Respondent. This might have been due to pressure of parents, particularly Father...”

As in most research, those undertaking the interviews and knocking on doors in order to gain a response were confronted by a range of problems relating to access. It appears that for some of the respondents’ parents there was an anxiety that the researchers were actually sales-people intent on selling everything from tape recorders to encyclopaedias.

Father was very sceptical about the interview and he demanded that I show him my “permit.” After assuring him that I was not from the police and was not trying to sell him a tape recorder he was keen for me to conduct the interview.

Mother was interested (perhaps I should say suspicious). She stopped me on way out of house to ask for more details of purpose of interview. She told me after our conversation she thought I might be trying to sell something and warned Respondent against being persuaded to buy something.

“I had considerable difficulty in convincing Respondent’s mother that I was not selling encyclopaedias. Respondent had not come home so I called again later. Another quite lengthy explanation followed before I was taken into the front room.”

“Mother described an experience with two self professed educationalists which had resulted in them buying £30 worth of encyclopaedias - this accounting for the initial suspicion and hostility I encountered in a pre interview call.”

“Mother brought in coffee, and apologised for nearly having shut the door in my face at first because she’d seen my car around the neighbourhood for several nights and had presumed I was selling books or something.”

The researchers had obviously experienced this response so often that they themselves began to “jokingly” reflect on the issues of selling.

“...friendly and welcoming family though father a bit stern and I felt it would have gone badly for me if I’d turned out to be selling encyclopaedias!”

### **Representations of Respondents: Class, Wealth, Home, and Appearance**

The impact of social class on future career trajectories has been well researched (Jenkins, 1983; Roberts, 1995; Willis, 1977). For example, Jenkins, Ashton (1976), and Field (1976) have examined the influence of social class in determining the future career path of individuals. The class status of respondents in the *Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles* project was also given great importance. The interviewers made detailed notes on each respondent with a particular emphasis on family background, home environment, and parental (usually the father’s) occupation and income. The following quotes illustrate the type of points noted.

“It is what one would call a lower middle class area - certainly Respondent would be classified as such by his occupation, dress, speech and by his peer-group ties.”

I suspect that, apart from any difficulties of temperament and normal sibling rivalry, the situation is worsened by the fact that the respondent is a grammar school boy in a working class home. His home is an old type council house and not very comfortable.

“Looked like a private semi in an unmade up road, but in the middle of a council estate, with working class sort of family good friendly interview with attractive girl.”

“A rough and ready house hold, as we might expect with such a big family.”

...The front room was leading off to another room which had been piled high with rubbish and it was very dirty. The living room was dark and the wallpaper was peeling. The TV dominated and was on throughout my visit.

The second quote illustrates the way in which the interviewer accounted for the perceived “problems” of the respondent as being due to the contrast between his home life (noted as working class) and his school life (implied as middle class). Undoubtedly, the interviewers held a set of expectations of each interviewee’s class background depending upon the individual’s educational background. Therefore, boys with more than one year’s further education (indicated by the letter “B” in their identification number) were largely expected to be from middle class backgrounds whereas those with less than one year’s further education (indicated by the letter sample “A” and “C” in their identification number) were expected to have more working class backgrounds.

In other interviews class based assumptions were based primarily on the individual’s occupation and orientation to work.

“Respondent’s father seems to have been very systematic and helpful when R decided to leave school. Respondent also showed signs of a clear middle class appraisal of jobs and prospects and the need to have help in decision-making.”

A comfortable, semi-detached house - which would be classified as working class, however, in terms of furnishings, general impression of the home...She reflects the type of unambitious, passive young worker common amongst factory girls and the antithesis of the conscious chooser of occupation - with work of peripheral significance in one’s life.

Respondent was a friendly, attractive young man in a good class of house - certainly lower middle. There was a friend of the family there who seemed well-educated and had a daughter doing social psychology at the University. The mother was articulate and well spoken also. This is not therefore a working class family in the sociological meaning of the term.

In these cases positive comments were made regarding those interviewees seen as middle class, whilst the working class respondents were often described negatively. Where the interviewers’ class based expectations were not borne out during the interview this seemed to feature prominently in the interview notes.

Respondent was friendly and intelligent - though not verbally accomplished. The home was untidy warm and comfortable - Father was very much a background figure - it was Mother with arms akimbo who broke into the interview and demanded to know about what was going on. Having being reassured she became friendly and made a cup of tea. Respondent has aspirations towards a white-collar job - being specifically attracted by the cleanliness of the draughtsman’s work. No other members of his family have such a job - neither do his friends but he seems to have been influenced by his school in the sense of having stayed on and worked hard for the extra year. This argues some identification with teachers. The parents gave no impression at all of wanting to be thought middle class [the sons were wandering about with bare torsos during the interview -

Mother did not bother about the mess on the table where we were sitting - Father sat munching a huge pile of toast in front of the TV speaking only to his dog]. It is not a socially mobile family unit as far as one can see. Perhaps the aspiration is merely towards a clean interesting well-paid job with no social status considerations.

This respondent was in sample B, and clearly fitted the interviewers' expectations of a middle class background. However, the interviewer is clearly surprised by the working class home environment and the parents' apparent lack of middle class aspiration. Perhaps as a result of this, the interviewer sympathised with the respondent who, by contrast, had aspirations. For example, his ambition to become a draughtsman was admired and he was deemed to be intelligent. This was reinforced by the fact that he left school with qualifications. The interviewer saw no evidence of family support or encouragement, instead the role of the school environment is highlighted, suggesting that his experience there led him to identify with the teachers rather than his family.

In general, it is evident that the observations and comments made about the respondents who had stayed on at school and tended to come from middle class backgrounds were positive. In cases where middle class respondents had not progressed as well as might be expected there is little criticism and in each case the respondent is portrayed positively.

However, assertions were sometimes made about "respectability" and in many cases the working class label was qualified with a comment about the "respectability" of the family. Wight (1993) locates respectability for working class males in hard work, being disciplined at work, having good timekeeping in employment, having a trade, "right living", being decent and having self respect, being well groomed, managing ones resources wisely, being restrained in drinking and gambling, and going to church. These criteria can compare very favourably to those rough or disorderly males, "wasters" or those in Wight's (1993) study who are labelled as "a bad lot," rough, lazy, "immune to work," promiscuous, anti-social, poor, and unemployed and not actively seeking work. This seems to be what the researchers were suggesting about the following respondent.

Respondent is one of those little rogues called a 'handful' by teachers, parents and anyone in authority. He didn't seem to be either school or career minded but more concerned with getting out with the boys, and spending his money.

"The parents didn't seem to have much influence or control over him and the general impression, from both them and his brothers, was that he was a bit of a black sheep."

Respondent had an adolescent disrespect for his parents - "oh they don't do any work"- and seemed to regard it as right and proper that he should rebel, whether against teachers, parents or employers...Irish, he was a scruffy little character who "gave plenty of cheek" to more than just the butcher he had worked for.

His mother confided that he was going through “that difficult age” and although their flat was one of the most tatty I have been in - lino floor and no carpet, food left out on table, washing and cooking facilities on the landing- the parents were extremely mild, polite and quite well dressed. That peculiar Irish mixture of caring less for surroundings than personal relationships.

This is one of the few respondents whose family had migrated to Leicester, coming from Ireland four years earlier. The description of the respondent and his home environment refers to his nationality in a derogatory manner. The family home is described as being poorly kept due to the family being Irish and not caring about their surroundings. Similarly, the respondent is described as being cheeky implying that his character was informed by his nationality. The respondent left school without any qualifications and had no wish to stay on longer. Although the parents are not blamed for the respondent’s lack of interest in school and career, their negative role is perhaps implied by their lack of “influence or control” over his behaviour. In this description the social class of the respondent is not explicitly referred to, however, the comments regarding the family background imply this. There were no surprises for the interviewer and the notes are accordingly negative.

Amongst our sample the employment status and individual attitudes towards work appear to have been highly significant in influencing the interviewer’s perception of the young worker. As in Wight’s study (1993) such attitudes seemed to have a greater bearing than all other factors, including class status. For example, judgements on personality were often linked to the respondents’ thoughts and feelings about their employment status and as the following quotes illustrate those who expressed disappointment about their employment situation tended to be criticised for having a poor attitude irrespective of social class.

“Respondent seems to have a bit of a chip on his shoulder, because he hasn’t got the kind of job he wanted, road construction. I thought for a grammar school boy he didn’t show much initiative over leisure.”

“I got the impression that he goes around with a chip on his shoulder, that society owes him a good job with short working hours and plenty of money.”

Likes to think of himself as a frustrated artist, writer and film star all rolled into one. Perhaps his background was responsible for his inability to realise his ambitions but he had an unhealthy desire to pin all his failings on to other people - his parents, his girlfriend, his boss.

As the preceding discussion has highlighted, the interviewer’s comments tended to be influenced by environmental factors. However, comments were also made about the physical characteristics of the interviewees. Such descriptions tended to be extreme, highlighting particularly positive or negative factors or “unusual” physical characteristics, as illustrated by the following quotes.

“Respondent is a tall, thin lad, looks physically rather awkward and a bit self conscious.”

“Respondent is the smallest person I have met in the sample - apart from rather tired eyes he looked about 12 years old.”

The following set of interviewer notes is amongst the most descriptive and most negative of the sample.

One cannot avoid commenting on the physical peculiarities of the boy and his mother. She was an extremely small mouse like woman who seemed to have all sparks of life damped out of her - she let me into the house hardly questioning my purpose and Respondent started answering my questions with the same lack of enquiry. He too was undersized, pitifully, pale and unglamorous looking dressed in a holey sweater and mucky jeans.

His complete lifelessness seemed to be a combination of environment [a miserable back street terraced house furnished with the barest of essentials and so dark] and congenital low intelligence... We conducted the interview in what appeared to be the junk room. Yet it was difficult to understand why the family was still so poverty stricken now that all three children were working and the eldest son had been for 9 years... This is his father's line, but it is difficult to say whether Respondent was going to do something about this as a career or whether it is just a daydream.

The physical characteristics of both the respondent and his mother are graphically recounted. The respondent's poor clothing is described in detail. The respondent's lack of interest in the survey is attributed to the poor home environment and “congenital” low intelligence. The respondent described here came from sample A, and accordingly it appears that the interviewer had low expectations, and in this case felt these were confirmed by the condition of the home environment. As neither the respondent nor his family changed the interviewer's opinion during the interview the resultant notes are negative and critical.

However, in other cases physical descriptions were often positive, identifying desirable physical features.

“...A very confident good looking individual whose intelligence was used for making a rationale of life - yet he wasn't bigoted.”

“Respondent was friendly but a little reserved, I think probably inhibited a bit by the tape. He was V good looking.”

Respondent was a quiet, rather attractive girl but was very nervous during the interview - physically trembling at time. She was, however, determined to play the hostess - preparatory to her marriage this year - and invited me to stay for tea.

“A well dressed good looking blonde who was reluctant at first to answer my questions but who thoroughly enjoyed it at the end. She was very talkative and confident.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, the comments again tended to be social class based, with positive physical attributes identified primarily amongst boys in sample B; those who had stayed on at school and were, therefore, more likely to fit the middle class profile of the interviewer.

Aside from physical characteristics, interviewers also gave accounts of the clothes worn by respondents at the time of the interview, particularly if the respondent was either “well groomed,” “scruffy,” or fashionably dressed. The quotes below illustrate the interviewers’ tendency to highlight extreme cases.

“Respondent very clean and tidy in appearance smartly dressed.”

“A poised, attractive, well dressed girl with a strong Leicester dialect.”

“A happy looking intelligent boy, well groomed and with an air of affluence.”

“When I first called he was absolutely filthy - he’d just come from work. The second time he was bathed and changed and was dressed in a well cut Beatles suit.”

“A rather bizarre character looking worn and tired dressed in skin-tight pale blue jeans, boots a thick leather belt and a black T-shirt. With long blonde hair styled in a Tony Curtis fashion and may well have been dyed.”

These comments on fashion were undoubtedly a reflection of the period in which the interviews were carried out. As Hebdige (1974) explains, 1964 was the year in which the first bank holiday confrontations between “mods” and “rockers” took place. The “mods” were defined as “working class teenagers ... who could be readily identified by characteristic hairstyles, clothing etc” (Hebdige, p. 4). Jenkins (1983) highlights further the importance of physical appearance amongst certain youth groups during this period. He identified that the working class group in his sample were “...more likely to be tattooed and ... less interested in up-to-date fashion styles, sticking to denims and leather jackets while tapered trousers and winkle-pickers were fashionable...” (Jenkins, p. 50) than the more middle class individuals who tended to be more “up-to-date”.

Assessments of the respondents’ level of intelligence were provided in the more extreme cases, for example, if the interviewee appeared to be either somewhat lacking in intelligence or particularly “bright”. The extracts below illustrate the type of notes made in the case of respondents who were thought to be of low intelligence.

“Respondent is mentally backward and was not able to answer any questions which required thought- I asked the simple questions but did not pursue any which I thought were unsuitable.”

A pathetic little boy. At a guess I’d say ‘D’ stream or worse of as secondary modern. Yet his Father repeated several times that he was very

shy and it may have been more nervousness than sheer stupidity that produced these poor questionnaire results.

The perceived high intelligence of other respondents was commented upon in a positive way, as highlighted by these quotes.

“He was an extremely intelligent boy, he used for example, such words as jubilant and extravert quite naturally. On leaving the house he said, ‘I suppose you are going to use the old psycho on all this.’”

“An alert young man, full of ideas and confidence in himself, learns quickly from experience.”

The respondents were also subject to judgement of their personality traits, again focusing on extremes, for example shyness, or at the opposite end of the spectrum, “cheekiness”.

“His mother told him to be sure to be serious in giving answers so he probably tends to be cheeky.”

“Respondent was extremely shy, would not answer the door, or look at me or speak to me at first.”

Very shy at first and so answers were very limited but became more interested and confident gradually. She hasn't very much confidence in herself, maybe because she has an elder sister (20) who is cleverer than her, according to the parents.

Certain personality traits, for example, cheerfulness, charm, and extraversion were seen as positive characteristics.

“Respondent is a cheerful likeable friendly lad, v co-operative and open, looks if anything a bit younger than his years and not very interested in his appearance, though clean and not exactly untidy.”

Respondent was most charming the whole time, and if he continues to use this charm for his own ends, he should do very well as a sales rep. His answers to Q76 give the impression that he is perhaps rather immoral. I would not say that this is not the case however. I think he answered the question in this way because he felt that it was the way a “gay young man” should answer such questions. He rather fancied himself as a ‘Tom Jones’.

What emerges from the analysis is the importance of the perceived social class of the respondent. It is apparent that the interviewing team held preconceived ideas about the respondent, which depended upon the sample in which the individual had been categorised. For example, the respondents in the “B” sample had stayed at school for at

least an extra year, and in most cases these respondents came from middle class homes in middle class areas. These respondents came from similar social backgrounds to the interviewers and, as such, the comments made tended to be empathetic and generally positive. The comments made about the boys in sample A who had left school at the earliest opportunity and, broadly speaking, came from more socially deprived backgrounds, were of a more negative nature, often irrespective of each individual's personal achievements.

### **Conclusions**

In this paper we have argued that for the secondary analysis of qualitative data to be effective in educational and social research, research need to also analyse interviewer notes where these are available. It was suggested that a secondary analysis of interviewer notes was crucial in providing insight into the research process and the experiences of those working in the field. However, we acknowledge that any secondary analysis of the interview notes need to be set in the context of a discussion of the ethical and methodological implications of qualitative secondary analysis including issues relating to confidentiality, anonymity, the nature of qualitative research, and the possible problem of auditing.

Despite these ethical and methodological concerns it was felt that the secondary analysis of interviewer notes was essential if the researchers were to fully understand the data collection process. In the current research a number of important themes and issues relating to the data collection process emerged that would ordinarily have remained hidden if we had not analysed the interviewer notes. Each of these themes could have had a potential impact upon the actual interview data and may have had some affect on any subsequent analysis. First, it is clear that many of the interviews, and the responses that were collected, were "viewed" through a "middle class lens". What emerges from the secondary analysis of the interviewer notes is that that the researchers often described working class respondents more negatively as compared to the middle class young workers they interviewed. Comments on physical appearance, family, income, and home environment all clearly fell along rigid class lines. Characteristics such as educational achievement, staying on at school, living in a "nice" home, having supportive parents, having middle class career aspirations, and displaying middle class behaviours were always viewed positively, and appeared to be what the researchers were looking for. If for some reason a middle class youngster had not achieved, rationale justifications were found and recorded in the interviewer notes. Yet, these characteristics were seemingly not at all present in many of the interviews with the working class youngsters in the sample. Likewise, the "fault" for any failures or having limited aspirations was clearly recorded as the respondent's own.

One possible explanation for this has to be the class background of the researchers. It appears that all of the researchers and interviewers were educated to at least degree level or were currently registered for degrees. The researchers own lifestyles, educational, and career achievements or aspirations must have contrasted sharply with those respondents who were living in relative poverty, and who had limited aspiration beyond their immediate circumstances. The researchers recognised in the middle class young workers educational and career patterns similar to their own and, arguably, as a consequence recorded more positive perceptions and observations in the interviewer

notes. Such a middle class lens must have mediated the data collection process and the subsequent write up.

Alongside the lens of class, there was also some evidence that gender and gender-based prejudices influenced the interview process. From the outset of the research, the inclusion of girls in the sample was contentious, with an assumption by the male researchers that the girls' experiences were less important than the boys (see O'Connor & Goodwin, 2004). Indeed, it was only at the insistence of a female researcher that girls were finally included in the sample. However, despite their inclusion it is clear that during the fieldwork gender-based assumptions were made about the female respondents. For example, the interview notes reveal some evidence that male researchers made assumptions that the girls would give up paid employment for marriage and motherhood at the first opportunity. Likewise, assumptions were also made about the need for male respondents to secure higher paid jobs in order that they could "provide" for their future families (see Goodwin & O'Connor, 2004).

From the analysis, it is also clear that the researchers own reflections on working in the field provided insights into the research process in a depth and context not available from simply reading the other main youth transitions data. The researchers described and reflected on a process that involves using imperfect technology and the resulting frustrations of constant technological breakdown. The researchers documented very clearly the hostility that they faced trying to access, and eventually going in to the young people's homes to interview. They described a research process that is imperfect, but where they try to collect authentic data even in the midst of interruptions, mild intimidation, indifference, and personal scrutiny.

Overall, the interviewer notes have provided a glimpse into the process of data collection, the attitudes and experiences of the researchers, and have highlighted a number of clear limitations with the youth transitions data that we have. Without first analysing the interview notes we would have been unaware of the middle class lens used by some of the researchers, and would not have known that some of the interviews were written up from memory. Highlighting these issues, however, is not to question the professionalism or competence of the original researchers, but more simply to locate our secondary analysis in its original context so that our analyses and discussions are as meaningful and as useful as possible. For the secondary analysis of educational or sociological data to be as effective we recommend that other researchers also submit any accompanying interviewer notes to the secondary analysis process. Who knows what this may reveal.

## References

- Ashton, D. N., & Field, D. (1976). *Young workers: From school to work*. London: Hutchinson.
- Corti, L., Day, A., & Backhouse, G. (2000, December). Confidentiality and informed consent: Issues for consideration in the preservation of and provision of access to qualitative data archives. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(3). Retrieved on August 8, 2002, from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-00/3-00cortietal-e.htm>

- Corti, L., Foster, J., & Thompson, P. (1995). *Archiving qualitative research: Social research update* (Working Paper No. 10). Guildford, UK: University of Surrey.
- Dale, A., Arber, S., & Proctor, M. (1988). *Doing secondary analysis*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Fielding, N. (2000, December). The shared fate of two innovations in qualitative methodology: The relationship of qualitative software and secondary analysis of archived qualitative data. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(3). Retrieved on August 6, 2002, from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-00/3-00fielding-e.htm>
- Goodwin, J., & O'Connor, H. (2002). *Forty years on: Norbert Elias and the Young worker project* (Working Paper No. 35). Leicester: University of Leicester. The Centre for Labour Market Studies.
- Goodwin, J., & O'Connor, H. (2003). *Exploring complex transitions: Looking back at the "golden age" of youth transitions*. ESRC Young Worker Project (Research Paper No. 5). Leicester: University of Leicester, The Centre for Labour Market Studies.
- Goodwin, J., & O'Connor, H. (2004). *Boys' gendered transitions for school to work*. ESRC Young Worker Project (Research Paper No. 7). Leicester: University of Leicester, The Centre for Labour Market Studies.
- Hammersley, M. (1997). Qualitative data archiving: Some reflections on its prospects and its problems. *Sociology*, 13(1), 131-142.
- Heaton, J. (1998). *Secondary analysis of qualitative data: Social research update* (Working Paper No. 22). Guildford, UK: University of Surrey.
- Hebdige, D. (1974). *The style of the mods*. Birmingham, UK: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.
- Hinds, P., Vogel, R., & Clarke-Steffen, L. (1997). The possibilities and pitfalls of doing secondary analysis of a qualitative data set. *Qualitative Health Research*, 7, 408-424.
- Jenkins, R. (1983). *Lads, citizens, and ordinary kids: Working-class youth life-styles in Belfast*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- O'Connor, H., & Goodwin, J. (2004). She wants to be like her mum. *Journal of Education and Work*, 17(1), 95-118.
- Public Record Office. (2001). *The public records system*. Retrieved on August 28, 2006, from [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/foi/?source=ddmenu\\_about2](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/foi/?source=ddmenu_about2)
- Riddell, D., Keil, T., & Green, B. (December 2, 1963). *Letter to Norbert Elias*. Marbach, Germany: Deutsches Literaturarchiv.
- Roberts, K. (1995). *Youth and unemployment in modern Britain*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, P. (2000, December). Re-using qualitative research data: A personal account. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(3). Retrieved on September 16, 2002, from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-00/3-00thompson-e.htm>
- Wight, D. (1993). *Workers not wasters: Masculine respectability, consumption, and employment in central Scotland*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labour*. Farnborough, UK: Saxon House.
- Wolfinger, W. H. (2002). On writing field notes: Collection strategies and background expectancies. *Qualitative Research*, 2(1), 85-95.

---

### Author Note

Dr. John Goodwin is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester (UK). He obtained a BSc degree in Sociology and Social Psychology from Loughborough University (UK) and a PhD in sociology, specialising on masculinity and work from the University of Leicester (UK). His principal research interests include the transition from school to work; the secondary analysis of work related qualitative data; life histories and biography; Irish labour markets; and gender and research methods. Along with Henrietta he has published widely in the area of school to work transitions. In 1999 he was a summer Visiting Research Fellow at the Policy Institute, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.

Henrietta O'Connor is a Lecturer at the Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester. Henrietta studied for her first degree, which was in Human Geography, at the University of London (UK). She went on to do a research degree at Trinity College, Dublin (Ireland) focusing on the life experiences of Irish women living in the UK. She then took up her first appointment at the University of Leicester, where she spent two years as a research officer working on a project concerned with issues of ethnicity. At the same time she worked as a tutor in the Geography department. Her research interests include young workers, the transition from school to work and the youth labour market; gender and social reproduction; and the use of the internet as a qualitative research tool.

This paper is part of an ESRC project, *From Young Workers to Older Workers: Reflections on Work in the Life Course* (R000223653). We would like to thank Ronald Chenail and the reviewers for their useful comments.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. John Goodwin, The Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester, 7-9 Salisbury Road, Leicester, UK LE1 7QR. Tel: 0116 2525944, e-mail [jdg3@le.ac.uk](mailto:jdg3@le.ac.uk)

Copyright 2006: John Goodwin, Henrietta O'Connor, and Nova Southeastern University

### Article Citation

Goodwin, J., & O'Connor, H. (2006). Contextualising the research process: Using interviewer notes in the secondary analysis of qualitative data. *The Qualitative Report*, 11(2), 374-392. Retrieved [Insert date], from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR11-2/goodwin.pdf>

---