

ARCHIVES AND MASS OBSERVATION

“The archival record is the direct, uninterpreted and authentic voice of the past: the primary evidence of what people did and what they thought... The archival record is the foundation on which we build all our histories”.

(Archives for the 21st Century, Crown Copyright 2009)

MASS OBSERVATION

The Mass Observation Archive results from the work of the social research organisation, Mass Observation. This organisation was founded in 1937 by three young men, who aimed to create an ‘anthropology of ourselves’. They recruited a team of observers and a panel of volunteer writers to study the everyday lives of ordinary people in Britain.

The Mass Observation Archive moved to Sussex University in 1970, and holds all the material generated between 1937 and 1949, with a few later additions from the 1950s and 1960s. In 2006, the Mass Observation Archive was awarded Designated status by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA)

The Mass Observation Project (MOP) is a unique UK-based writing project which has been running since 1981. It provides a structured programme within which “ordinary” people can write directly about their lives in the knowledge that what they send in will be archived for posterity and used for social research. It also creates a resource of qualitative longitudinal social data with an emphasis on subjectivity and self representation which will contribute to our understanding of everyday life in the late 20th and early 21st century.

The ethos of the Mass Observation Archive is that everyone can participate in creating their own history or social science. The Mass Observers do not constitute a statistically representative sample of the population but can be seen as reporters or “citizen journalists” who provide a window into their worlds.

<http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/the-archive>

<http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm>

<http://www.archives.wyjs.org.uk/>

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

<http://archiveshub.ac.uk/>

Archives are a means of preserving documents for future posterity. Items held in archive collections can be historical or contemporary, and are kept for the purpose of preservation as well as reuse by others. Archives can vary from large scale, such as The National Archives, to local archives like The West Yorkshire Archive, to those of specific research projects, such as The Timescapes Archive. Some archives draw material from formal sources, such as the National Archives who archive government documents, whereas others may include more personal or informal records and collections, for example the Mass Observation Archive.

Archives are also a valuable resource for those researching family life, as well as social history, allowing for the ‘piecing together’ of more personal histories, based around place or person. The Mass Observation Archive is an excellent example of this.

THE TIMESCAPES ARCHIVE

The Timescapes archive aims to store original social sciences data from across the Timescapes projects, allowing future access by other researchers, ensuring the high quality data is well used. This also allows the data to reach a wider audience, giving a greater ‘voice’ to those who have participated. The archive is multimedia and searchable, making it accessible and flexible. The data seen within this exhibition is material that will ultimately be archived within the Timescapes archive.



MASS OBSERVATION PROJECT (MOP)

As part of the Mass Observation Project, in 2000 members of the public were invited to write about a number of themes associated with family lives. This included the topics 'Your Family' and 'Same Sex Relationships in the Family'.

YOUR FAMILY

Participants were encouraged to describe their family generally, explain how they got along with other family members, family occasions, problems, secrets, as well as experiences of adoption, step parents and step children and how they valued their family relationships. (Please see the washing line for complete copies of text included below)

FEMALE, AGED 19

This particular participant reflected on her happy and privileged childhood. Her parents were in their mid twenties when she was born and had decided that they were ready to have children and had 'planned everything in advance'. She felt wanted and loved, but didn't consider herself spoilt. She has many happy memories of family holidays, birthdays etc. She attributes the success of her family life to the fact that:

"...family was so important to my parents [so] we always sat down together to eat, and we spent time talking to each other. Mum enjoyed taking me and my sister out on daytrips, and we often had friends round to play."

This is in stark contrast to her perception of how her much younger sister is parented. As her parents' are older now...she is not the focus of their lives like we were...often "just to keep her quiet", she is encouraged to sit and watch videos..." She also observes that her younger sister eats her meals in front of the TV, rather than sitting down to family meals. She concludes that

"All in all, her lifestyle is very different to my childhood one, and she is showing signs of being quite spoilt".

FEMALE, 47 YEARS

Another participant commented on how her family lived very close to each other (10 mile radius of home town), and had done so for years. In fact her parents had been born a few streets apart and their families had known each other for years.

Despite this physical closeness, she observes that "...none are particularly close to each other" and that "everyone keeps themselves to themselves".

However, she does point out that all her relatives are pleasant and that they can be relied upon in times of emergencies and family celebrations.

MALE, AGED 80

This participant had a younger brother who was sadly killed in World War II. This early loss of his brother, meant that post war, he felt like an only child.

In 1949 he married a girl from a very large family and suggests

"...there may well have been a subconscious desire to surround myself with family...I felt that I had found the sort of background I had been looking for and one in which I hoped our children would feel happy and supported".

SAME SEX RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FAMILY

Volunteers were also asked to reflect upon any gay and lesbian family members and explore their family's awareness of these types of relationships. Were these relationships openly discussed and accepted or considered an 'open secret'. Were these family members treated differently? What was the nature of their participation within the family and did they contribute to experiences of family life?

A heterosexual 36 year old male participant from Edinburgh recalls his 'somewhat homophobic' father who disliked any discussion of homosexuality and viewed openly gay celebrities with 'profound suspicion'. He points out that this homophobia involves a great deal of denial as their family's circle of friends included several gay and lesbian individuals.

"There are a couple women, University friends of my parents and part of the family circle of family friends, who have become honorary aunts. They are very much a couple and have always lived together...They passed on their expertise in fishing, handling small boats and card games, consumed whiskey at a steady rate and dressed with a certain masculine swagger, down to cowboy hats and cigarillos. Now to the practiced eye of the man of the world I am today, all this tends to make up a picture...their sexuality has never been discussed by anyone from my parent's generation...One of the couple of women has recently been very ill and I remember dad musing over how lucky she was to have such a good friend to look after her..."

This denial also extended to a male friend of the family who displayed very theatrical mannerisms and was clearly gay.

"Dad always observed that he'd always wondered why the [friend] had never married but that he has a female friend of long standing who lives in the same block of flats. They go to shows together, and regularly meet up for a good old gossip. "...and you know, there's nowt as queer as folk!" he observed apparently without irony."

Another participant, a 39 year old male from Liverpool, relates how his sister had recently taken a lesbian lover.

