

# Longitudinal research using archival sources: A case study of deserted wives in rural New South Wales, 1900–1914

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## Abstract

Longitudinal research is valuable for examining patterns of change over time but it presents several difficulties. Archival sources are publically available records that offer a way of doing longitudinal research without time delays. In this paper, I describe popular archival records that are accessible on line and use them to explore outcomes for 24 families in one NSW town seeking support following spousal desertion. The techniques were similar to the constant comparative method used in grounded theory, with each piece of data compared with other pieces to build up a 'theory' of each family. At least one record was found for every family, and records for four individuals spanned over 60 years. In some cases, records contained a wealth of detail. It was possible to deduce probable long-term outcomes for the 24 couples. Three couples remained together until the death of one spouse, five couples divorced and/or remarried and nine couples appeared to separate without divorcing. The outcome for seven couples was not clear. The study shows that, with appropriate research questions, archival sources can be used for longitudinal sociological research.

**Keywords:** archives, constant comparative method, deserted wives, historical sociology, longitudinal research

Much of sociologists' research is short term; we administer surveys or interview people and then wonder what eventually happened to our participants. Longitudinal research is one way to address this but it has considerable logistical problems. In this paper, I describe an approach to longitudinal research that uses publically available archival sources, illustrated by a study of deserted wives in rural New South Wales.<sup>1</sup>

Longitudinal research has been defined as emphasising the study of change using at least three repeated observations (Ployhart and Vandenberg 2010). It is ideal for studying topics such as organisational change or human development, and for establishing causality over time (Campbell et al. 2011; Matton et al. 2007; Ployhart and Vandenberg 2010). However, researchers wanting to use longitudinal methods must overcome several difficulties. The most often cited problem

is that of attrition and the risk of bias in subsequent findings (Ployhart and Vandenberg 2010; Ployhart and Ward 2011). The extended time needed makes longitudinal research resource intensive and expensive (Campbell et al. 2011), often requiring multiple funding applications over time to sustain a project (Matton et al. 2007). The delay in obtaining results is a barrier to the rapid publication expected today (Matton et al. 2007), while editors and reviewers are not always familiar with longitudinal methods (Ployhart and Ward 2011). There is also an ethical aspect in longitudinal studies of vulnerable groups such as domestic violence victims, with the need to ensure participants' safety and security over time (Campbell et al. 2011; Mychasiuk and Benzies 2012).

### **Archival sources**

Archival sources offer one way to overcome some problems of longitudinal research. They are publically available (subject to privacy legislation) and can offer rich insights into many aspects of life at the national, state and local level. They can be accessed in person at national and state repositories of archives, in local collections and, increasingly, on line. Once considered the domain of historians and genealogists, their use is limited only by the research questions asked and the methods used to interrogate the data. Topics range from the micro level, such as Mishra's study of deviant women in colonial Fiji (Mishra 2013), to the macro level, including studies of babies born to destitute mothers in Melbourne (McCalman et al. 2007; Morley et al. 2006), fertility of Tasmanian convicts (Kippen et al. 2011), and resilience of soldiers who fought in World War 1 (*Founders & Survivors Chainletter* 2014).

There are several benefits of using archival sources. They may contain a wealth of detail and potentially give researchers the ability to follow persons or events over many years using data that are immediately accessible. It is a relatively low-cost way of doing research, with the principal expenses being cost of travel to repositories and payment for use of online resources. Disadvantages, particularly when using small local collections, include the difficulty in finding which records are available and where, and establishing whether all relevant records have been retained, which can impede quantitative studies and limit generalisability. Decisions about retention of records often reflect institutional or personal priorities, together with issues of power and gatekeeping. Researchers always need to consider whether the non-retention of records has resulted in the concealment or distortion of particular viewpoints or events that may give rise to biased or partial findings. Similarly, information may be presented in ways that conceal shortcomings or exaggerate good points, particularly in documents such as eulogies.

The use of archival sources also presents the challenge of names. The ethical demands of anonymity and confidentiality mean that researchers usually conceal participants' identities from an early stage by code numbers or pseudonyms. In archival research, it is essential to retain participants' names until the research is complete, and when reporting findings researchers must decide whether the use of names is appropriate.

Names and personal details pose difficulties for another reason. It is only since the advent of computerisation that consistent spelling of names has occurred. When coupled with low literacy skills this means that people can be hard to trace in records. Furthermore, in some circumstances people may have tried to conceal their real names by using aliases (McCalman et al. 2007).

Despite these difficulties, archival sources contain a rich variety of materials for researchers, as I will illustrate now in the case study.

### **Case study: background**

Grimshaw (1983) claims that in Australia's first 100 years, the preponderance of men, isolation and the 'frontier' ethos shaped family relations. They magnified existing patriarchal norms that

governed behaviours within marriage. Men were expected to provide for their wives while women were to tend the home and use their moral superiority to civilise their menfolk (Bradbury 2005; Summers 1975). However, the introduction of the *Deserted Wives and Children Act* in 1840 showed that these norms were sometimes ignored. The *Act* was designed to ensure that men provided financial support for their wives and children, including those in established *de facto* unions and exnuptial children. Its title was a misnomer because physical separation was not necessary. However, in rural areas the economic depression of the 1890s exacerbated the extent of marital separation caused by the itinerant nature of rural work such as mining, shearing and droving (Finlay 1999; Twomey 1999). Those seeking support applied to a magistrate and appeared in Courts of Petty Sessions to argue their cases, although not all applications proceeded to hearing. Husbands/fathers were summoned to appear, with both parties presenting evidence and calling witnesses. Men who failed to appear, or who defaulted on payments, could be arrested and gaoled. Hearings under the *Act* were held in many country towns and case papers provide names of parents, some children, witnesses, evidence and outcomes.

The aim of the research was to use archival sources to investigate long-term outcomes for those involved in support applications. In particular, I wanted to follow each parent from marriage to death, where necessary using information about children to verify parents' findings.

### Materials and methods

The Riverina Regional Archives in Wagga Wagga holds case papers of hearings under the *Act* for several towns in southern NSW. One small town was selected and all applications by deserted wives and children (but excluding exnuptial cases) from 1900 to 1914 were included. Details of families were extracted from case papers and matched with information derived from online archival databases, using techniques similar to the constant comparative method used in grounded theory, with each piece of data compared with other pieces to build up a 'theory' of the family (Denscombe 2014; McCann and Clark 2003). Information was entered in a spreadsheet and an audit trail and journaling were used to record decisions.

The following archival sources were used in the study:

1. *NSW registration indexes of births, deaths and marriages*. These cover events since the introduction of civil registration in 1856. Under privacy legislation, there is no access to records for births after 1914, marriages after 1964 and deaths after 1984. Similar records exist in all states and territories, with free access everywhere except to data from Victoria.
2. *The NSW Divorce Case Papers Index, 1873–1930*. This lists plaintiffs, respondents and co-respondents. Access is free.
3. *Commonwealth and State electoral rolls*. Adult citizens must register to vote and electoral rolls contain names, addresses and occupations. The National Archives in Canberra has complete rolls since Federation on microfiche, while state archives and libraries hold rolls of local significance. Some rolls are also accessible through subscription databases (see below).
4. *Enlistment papers*. Enlistment papers for the 1914–1918 Australian Imperial Force show applicants' names, ages and places of birth, and name, relationship and address for their next-of-kin. They also include details of military service and any subsequent correspondence. Online access is free through the National Archives of Australia 'Discovering Anzacs' website.
5. *Trove digitised newspapers*. The National Library of Australia has a free searchable online database of Australian newspapers from the early 1800s to 1954. It includes many small local newspapers reporting the minutiae of daily life.

6. *Subscription databases.* The databases Ancestry<sup>□</sup> and Find My Past<sup>□</sup> contain numerous digitised records from national, state and other archives, searchable by name. Access is by payment of an annual fee or through some libraries.

### Findings

There were case papers for 24 families.<sup>2</sup> Two applications were 'signed' with a cross, indicating the women were functionally illiterate. The stated period of desertion ranged from one week to six years but was usually less than one year. This suggests that wives were uncertain about when their support had ceased and court officials used nominal dates for cases to proceed.

Ten cases were withdrawn before hearing, possibly suggesting women used the process to make husbands accept their responsibilities, or to trace spouses. Of the remaining 14, payment orders were made in all but one case (discussed below). The evidence presented at hearings varied greatly in amount and detail, and was not always corroborated. In two cases, women gave evidence of their husbands' violence towards them and one spoke of her husband's drinking. Three husbands thought their wives had committed adultery, while another complained that his wife did not keep the house clean or have meals ready on time. One man stated that he had left home to try to find work, while another who was working away from home sent a letter in impeccable handwriting offering to walk 100 miles (160 km) in 48 hours in the middle of summer to defend the case.

In the searches of archives, at least one record was found for every couple named in the case papers. There were marriage records for 20 of the 23 couples who claimed to be married (there was one *de facto* marriage) and birth records for 108 children. A few of these were children of previous marriages of one parent, while it is probable that other children were born after the 1914 cut-off for access to records. Death records were found for 32 of 48 parents.

In some cases, it was possible to track parents for a considerable time. The longest period of records from marriage to death was 66 years while for three other people the records spanned more than 60 years. In contrast, no records were found after the date of the desertion application/hearing for one couple or their children, three women and five men. There may be several reasons for this, including emigration or change of name, and the difficulty of correctly identifying commonly occurring names in archives.

From the archival records, it is possible to deduce probable long-term outcomes for the 24 couples. Three couples remained together until the death of one spouse, five couples divorced and/or remarried while nine couples appeared to separate without divorcing. The outcome for seven couples is not known. The following vignettes illustrate the nature of evidence that is available in archives. They were chosen because of the breadth and depth of material they contain.

*Family 1.* The couple were married in Victoria in 1892 (Ancestry) and had four daughters (NSW birth index). The wife lodged three applications for support between 1900 and 1903 alleging desertion and violence while her husband suggested she had been unfaithful and that she refused to live with him (case papers). The magistrate dismissed the case, giving no reasons for his decision. At different times between 1903 and 1915, the four daughters were each deemed neglected and sent to the Parramatta Industrial School in Sydney. In the 1903 admission record, the father was stated to have deserted and the mother was called respectable but at the 1910 admission, the mother was described as a prostitute and the daughter aged 15 as having a venereal disease. In these records, the mother was noted as moving between various NSW towns (Ancestry). In 1915, the father died in the study town (NSW death index) but no further records were found for the mother or three of the daughters.

*Family 2.* The couple were married in 1893 (NSW marriage index) and had six children (NSW birth index) at the time of the desertion hearing in 1903, which was reported in the local

newspaper (Trove). The wife claimed her husband failed to support her, while he claimed that she went with other men. The court made a payment order against the father (case papers). In 1904, police found the two eldest sons begging and charged them with having no lawful means of support, and they were sent to a reformatory in Sydney. The admission records described their father as a hard-working man who was separated from his wife, an idle woman of indifferent character (Ancestry). Between 1905 and 1914, the wife gave birth to six more children with no father named (NSW birth index). In 1906, the husband divorced his wife, naming a correspondent (NSW divorce index). Electoral records show that the woman and her ex-husband lived in separate houses in the study town until their deaths in 1944 and 1955 (NSW death index). The local newspaper published an obituary for the woman, describing her as a wife and mother and making no mention of the divorce (Trove).

*Family 3.* The couple married in 1885 (NSW marriage index) and had ten children (NSW birth index). In 1914, the wife applied for and received support for the two youngest children (case papers). In 1915, one son enlisted for Army service, naming his mother as next-of-kin and giving an address for her in Melbourne; however, the Army appeared to prefer male next-of-kin and added the father's address in NSW. The son noted this and wrote that his mother was next-of-kin. The son was killed in action and his file contained numerous letters between the Army and both parents, each of whom claimed to be next-of-kin and entitled to the son's effects (enlistment papers). In 1917, the wife obtained a divorce, citing cruelty and desertion. The case was heard in Sydney and it was reported in a newspaper far from where the couple had lived (Trove). Electoral records show the wife living in Melbourne until 1949, but no death or remarriage records were found. The husband died in the study town in 1927 (NSW death index) and in his Will he left his estate to his children and brother (Find My Past).

*Family 4.* In 1908, the wife lodged and then withdrew an application for support, signing the form with her mark. The family surname made searching difficult and only records that also contained the man's unusual middle name were considered. No marriage record was found, and the couple appeared to have no children. In 1909, electoral rolls showed them living together in northern Victoria, and in 1912 the wife died in an adjacent part of NSW (NSW death index). In 1916, the man's son enlisted, giving his father as next-of-kin with an address in southern NSW, and stating his mother was dead (enlistment papers). Birth records showed that the son had been born to the man in a previous marriage (NSW birth index). The son was killed in action and his file contained a note stating his father's address was now c/- the Master in Lunacy, Sydney, because the father was in an institution for the mentally ill (enlistment papers). The father died in 1931 (NSW death index) and a coroner's inquest found he was killed by another inmate of the institution (Ancestry).

## Conclusions

It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss the findings about desertion in detail, but it would seem that the *Act* had some success in ensuring fathers supported their families. Ten cases were withdrawn before hearing, and payment orders made in 13 cases. Although five husbands defaulted (not discussed here) the fact that eight complied suggests that the *Act* was partially effective in reducing poverty and dependence on charity. Magistrates did not provide reasons for their judgements and hence it was not possible to know why one application was refused.

The case study shows that archival records can be used for longitudinal research, allowing researchers to follow people for long periods in some instances. Use of the constant comparative method allowed matching of records across different sources, providing confirmation that the correct persons had been identified. The use of consistent procedures and an audit trail of decision making reduced the risk of errors.

Despite prolonged searching, it was not always possible to identify a particular person in records, especially when the family name was a common one. This is a limitation when using archival records for longitudinal research. One way to minimise its effect is to view full certificates for births, deaths and marriages rather than relying on online indexes (McCalman et al. 2008). Another limitation is the difficulty of identifying couples in *de facto* relationships. Australian census records are de-identified and electoral rolls are arranged alphabetically so it is not possible to identify people living in *de facto* relationships in households.

The study could be extended by using a wider range of archival sources in Australia and overseas, including those not available on line, and this may enable more people to be traced. The challenge in using archival sources for longitudinal research is to identify appropriate research questions that can be explored with the sources that are available.

### **Funding**

This research received no grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The author declares no conflict of interest.

### **Notes**

1. Data used in this paper were collected as part of the requirements for a Postgraduate Diploma in Genealogical Studies, University of Strathclyde.
2. I have chosen not to provide citations that would identify the people involved or the study location. These are available on request.

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