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# Reflections on Researching Colonial Policy on Child Welfare Services Using Historical Method

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ABSTRACT

The literature and research in social work and social welfare domain is expanding rapidly in most advanced nations. However, seemingly this scenario is not reflected in Malaysia. Scholars intent on learning about history and the development of social work would be confronting challenging difficulties to locate and obtain appropriate documented sources, since reference are not readily available. Though there are contributions to the literature that suggest social welfare in Malaysia was originally moulded by British colonial policy, to date there is no research that has been undertaken to explain or ascertain this proposition. Thus, the method used in the study is considered 'unusual' because during the decolonisation period, most studies emphasised on the economic and political aspects of British colonialism. Working on the ground of developing the knowledge base of social work and social policy, at least in the context of Malaysia, it is the researcher's intention to explore this area from a historicl perspective because to contribute to this knowledge base, the first aspect to be learned is its history. In essence, an understanding of the evolution, structure and role of the state and other agencies involved in welfare provision is a necessary pre-requisite for a better understanding of the aforementioned knowledge. The use of both the archival materials and secondary sources will project a more vivid documentation on the importance of the state's role in welfare provision, the structure and operation of the system, in particular towards the welfare of the children.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the qualitative methodology focusing on the historical research method in social work. Historical research is defined as the systematic process of collecting and evaluating evidence that we have discovered from past occurrences, to arrive at conclusions about the causes, effects or trends of past events that may be helpful in explaining the present or anticipating future events (Leashore and Cates, 1985). This method is also referred to as 'documentary analysis' and 'historical analysis' (Dawson, 1991: 253). Although Dawson calls these synonymous, the researcher has actually seen them as separate methods. Such research further involves careful and accurate interpretation of the data. As Chambers (1992: 493) argues, one of the researcher's tasks in undertaking historical research is 'to tell stories of the past as accurately, honestly, and fairly as possible'. In this process, the researcher will 'bring forward people telling their own stories and, and to provide plausible explanations of the course events took over time'.

Social work researchers have also used the historical method to study social welfare history (Jones, 1958; Woodroofe, 1962; Day, 2000) or the historical perspective of colonial policy (Hodge, 1973). Most of the issues currently faced by the social work professions today have knowledge in the past that characterizes much of the professions' development. Thus, historical study has the ability to increase knowledge concerning the social work professions, identify the origins of social policies and social problems and provide an understanding of the organisational, individual, social, political and economic circumstances in which a particular phenomenon occurs. Historical research is closely linked to social work, because the discipline has widely incorporated historical study into its knowledge base (Thyer, 2001). Since this aspect of research will serve as one of the knowledge bases of social work history, particularly in the Malaysian context, the use of a historical method is highly appropriate to this discipline because its knowledge base is historical. However, it has been essential to avoid treating history in similar terms to historical research, a methodological process. History, conversely, is a discipline with its own subject enquiry. This history is, in fact, relevant to the history of telling and to the

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researcher's account of social welfare policy and child welfare services in Malaysia that uses the setting with regards to decolonisation, and the post-war situation. In the present study, the researcher uses historical research as a methodology to provide a historical knowledge base of social welfare services and policies for children during the decolonisation period of the British in Malaya.

Social work scholars have, of course, used historical methods to study the history of social work or the history of social service institutions and policies (Padgett, 1998). Nevertheless, interest in the 'process' (Stuart, 1988) of using historical methods to conduct social work research is just emerging, and recent handbooks on social work research have included a section on this specific method (Stuart, 1988; Graham and Al-Krenawi, 2001; Thyer, 2001) particularly in the US. However, this scenario does not seem to apply to social work research in the UK since research publications incorporating historical approaches to social work are scarce. The interests of researchers in pursuing further knowledge have at times been neglected. It seems that scholars in the field of social work in Britain are reluctant to write about the historical method, or it could be considered an unpopular method because it is associated with the field of history.

Social science scholars accept historical research as a type of qualitative research. Much has been written about qualitative research which involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials concerning current issues (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Sherman and Reid, 1994; Gay, 1996). Therefore, collecting data from archives is not necessary, since the agencies or the participants are still in existence. As a primary method of data collection, document review, as Padgett (1998: 13) argues, 'is familiar to social workers'. Despite the dominance of other research methods in social work, Fisher and Dybicz (1999: 105) agree that historical research is an accepted method for doctoral research in social work, and has a significant place in social work. However, these authors' study of doctoral dissertations in social work, which includes 'both theses written for the Ph.D. and D.S.W. degrees' (Fisher and Dybicz, 1995: 105) revealed that its use has declined over time, as compared to before the Second World War when it was a common approach. They further see that contemporary social work 'neglects and marginalizes' this type of research (Fisher and Dybicz, 1999:105) compared with other methods, since there are few studies using history as a research method in social work.

Social welfare history is an under-researched area in Malaysia and thus the study will serve to provide a much clearer picture regarding social welfare policy during British rule in Malaya. Though of late this method has not been popular among social work researchers, it is certainly applicable for the present study, which requires further clarification and answers to some of the existing gaps pertaining to the establishment of the Malaysian Department of Social Welfare (DSW) and its services to children during the British period of administration in Malaya. Because there is no directly accessible data from the agency during the period of study (1946-1957) and there is no secondary data on the topic of interest, resorting to collecting archival materials was deemed as necessary, which prompted the need to collect data from British archives. Furthermore, the researcher's experience may be different from other Malaysian researchers who may have used archival materials from archives either locally or overseas, as it could be the case that their research areas or interests were about events that were documented in secondary sources, or easily traceable in archives from previous works.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

Hill (1993) stresses that there is a 'high risk of factual inadequacy and intellectual distortion' for an archival study based on materials from one archive only. Thus most of the fieldwork to consult original sources was conducted in a variety of libraries and archives in Britain and Malaysia. Historical records pertaining to Malaysia are found in abundance overseas, but they are scattered in several countries (Hassan, 1981). Research work in the UK was essential for the review of historical materials, since major source documents reflecting government policies during the colonial period are mainly available in the Public Record Office (PRO) in London. Acquiring data in historical research is not an easy task, given that it involves systematic, objective data collection and analysis. 'Content analysis' is the approach used to analyse documents (Padgett, 1998) in this study. When approaching or examining a source, among the questions the researcher always bore in mind were 'who wrote this document and for what purpose?' and 'how does this document relate to a previous or later one?' (Hill, 1993; Jones, 1994; Jordanova, 2000; Blaxter *et al*., 2001).

Processing the data consisted of collecting, classifying, evaluating and interpreting the material available. The researcher had to select and identify the necessary materials and sources, which needed to be analysed. The researcher strove to focus on some of the linking events to explain the circumstances relating to the development of social welfare services for children. Among the events were the impact of British colonialism; the aftermath of the War; the re-establishment of British colonial administration; and the road to independence. These events clarified how the colonial government took responsibility in response to those changes by formulating social welfare policy for children, implemented through the DSW.

An analysis was carried out through the data, working file by file and separating them according to specific themes, for instance, early social welfare services, colonial welfare policy, services for children, policy towards

children. To carry out the research analysis, the researcher needed some knowledge of government administration and related events in the period of study. Thus, the researcher searched for and not only used all pertinent materials, but tried to be imaginative with regard to information that might appear in sources, according to the research questions under study (Leashore and Cates, 1985). Generally, the researcher organised her findings by using thematic and chronological presentation (Stuart, 1988: 358). Employing the strategy of 'illustrative style' as suggested by May (1997) has helped the researcher to select data in relation to its ability to illustrate general themes, which emerged and were supported by the use of specific examples. Several researchers have employed a historical method (Kai, 1987; Harper, 1991; Leong, 1999) using a chronological approach (Kai, 1987) and a thematic approach (Harper, 1991) in their studies.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the data collections process, some issues pertaining methodology had emerged which is discussed below.

***Methodological Issues that Emerged from the Study:***

Each country has its own way of keeping records safe, its own history of organisational set-up and different management systems. In the case of the Arkib Negara Malaysia (ANM) establishment, prior to the Second World War, there was no action taken to formulate any systematic process of establishing the archives. After the surrender of the Japanese, the government was obliged to concentrate its attention on many pressing issues connected with rehabilitation and later with the Emergency which delayed the establishment of the archives. The widespread destruction of official documents all over Malaya during the Japanese Occupation contributed to the impression that the archival issue was of low priority.

Whilst most of the resource centres in the UK are searchable via online catalogues which enabled the researcher to order documents before a visit to the site, at the time of this study the ANM is only just moving towards it. Materials mostly sent over to the ANM after 1997 are being electronically entered into the system. However, the progress of computerisation for the older materials is slightly delayed because the archive staff have to physically identify the contents of each file (AO, 2003), which, indeed, is very time-consuming.

***Accessibility, availability and constraints of data in the UK:***

The private papers in the UK are located at various libraries and are not centralised at one archive as the researcher discovered when she wanted resources about colonial officers' private papers listed in the catalogue available at the Historical Manuscript Commission (HMC). Much of the materials in the Colonial Office (CO) records in PRO were organised according to country and it were relatively easy to determine which gave the relevant record series for the country required. However, this way was not of much help to the researcher because when looking for "Malaya" as a country, several general records were presented. The researcher then sought to cross check with various names and subject searches using "colonial" as the keyword, and then the period around 1946 to 1957. The researcher accessed records using the CO index shelved with the CO catalogues, or by online catalogues searched under the name of country. To the researcher, the online catalogue, though not necessarily comprehensive, was a useful means of searching for both subject series and advisory committee records.

The PRO also hold records of the British government relating to the British Empire; these constituted an invaluable resource for the study of British policy on Malaya and the broader history of British political, social and economic policies. However, the availability of the manuscripts depended on colonial officials who wrote about matters considered to be vital from their own perspective. This means that many aspects of social history, in particular, were ignored as compared to economic and political issues related to colonial government. 'Although the source materials on such themes among these records were available, their occurrence depends on their importance to administrators; periods of unrest, for instance, might prompt greater surveillance of indigenous populations' (PRO pamphlet, 2000).

***Accessibility, availability and constraints of data in Malaysia:***

Any researcher intending to search for records at the ANM will be asked to consult the Information and Enquiry Desk who will then advise the researcher to go through the List of Descriptions and the List of Accessions. These lists have been available since the establishment of the ANM in 1957 up to the present. Based on the period of study (1946-57), the most relevant lists were the List of Accession 1957-1967 and the List of Accession 1968. However, at the suggestion of the archive staff, the researcher had to look at the current lists (lists after 1968) as well, for although the state archive offices were built much later, this does not mean that the earliest records of the state can be found at the ANM Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. It depended, as previously indicated, largely on whether or not the office or the government agencies, who were requested to send the old records as soon as the ANM was established in 1957, had complied on time. Some departments had

sent their records later than the stated date, while some had sent older records, such as from the 1940s, together with those from a much later date, for example in 1970. Thus records dated around the year 1940s can also be found among those from the 1970s. Another issue is that the contents of the List of Accessions are always mixed up, due to their not being chronologically arranged (AO, 2003). The contents of the opened files generally concerned the minutes of meetings, letters and memos. Unfortunately, some of the minutes of meetings were found to be incomplete, missing or empty (e.g., DSW 29). The researcher could not access the Annual Report of Malaya 1957, which resulted in a reduction in the amount of data, especially when analysing the continuity of the report. However, no particular reason was given by the archive staff for it being missing. Thus, the researcher decided not to rely on these minutes due to the missing pages, and sometimes the pages were not arranged in order.

In one case, during the second fieldwork data collection in Malaysia, some of the files from the 'Federal Secretariat 1848-1957' could be borrowed because they were in the process of being bar-coded, which constituted a further constraint to the accessibility of data. Annual reports of departments represent the most important source of reference, in that they record all activities and statistics in detail about the organisation under study. During the period of study, the Federation of Malaya Annual Report (FMAR) existed, but its content was slightly different from the department annual report. The FMAR stated concisely all the activities and statistics from various government agencies, including the DSW. However, the researcher only managed to get hold of the Annual Report of the DSW since its establishment in 1946 to 1948. Reports between the years 1949-1957 were not available. Some of the Department of Social Welfare Annual Report (DSWAR) found in Setia Usaha Kerajaan (SUK) or State Secretariat file was incomplete and there was a gap in the report. Inevitably, the researcher had to rely on the FMAR for data during the period of 1949 until 1957.

There were a number of gaps in the documentation for Malaysian history, caused in part by white ants (termites), the climate and also the destruction of files that took place during the Japanese Occupation when large quantities of official documents, printed reports and other records were destroyed. Additionally, many records have been destroyed and damaged because of poor storage conditions. This provides a further reason for choosing the period of study to begin in 1946.

In the British colonial administrative structure, the State Secretariat (SS) were among the most important repositories of documents. They contained communications with higher authorities, state-level discussion issues, and perhaps most importantly a large amount of local details reported by the districts, much of which was transmitted to the High Commissioner or, if at all, in summary to London. The SS files are one of the most fruitful sources which a social or economic historian can use. However, the SS did not hold or contain materials about the state itself, because sometimes they also had reports of other states.

***Administrative and Technical Issues in Malaysian Archives:***

Although most archives were opened to the public on working days and some archives provided extended hours and/or weekend access, some were closed during local festivities. In terms of manpower, some archives did not have sufficient staff to deal with researchers and to retrieve documents from the repository (Habibah, 1987). Thus, the availability of documents was restricted to a specified time. In some archives, during lunch break, new applications for documents were not accepted. The constant switching of staff on duty also affected the amount of time taken to photocopy materials. Some archival institutions placed restrictions on the amount of records to be made available. For instance, there was a restriction of one box or five items to be borrowed at a time. The time taken to make the documents available to the researcher could come to around 30 minutes (at PRO), and sometimes longer, if the archive's staff could not find the material on the shelves (at ANM). However, at PRO, the researcher could write in via e-mail or post or make a call to reserve documents beforehand. This facility effectively reduced the time needed to access material during the actual visit.

Both Britain and Malaysia have similar rights of access to archives for its citizens. In Malaysia, under the National Archives Act No. 44 of 1966, records that are over 25 years, which have been reviewed for permanent preservation at the ANM are open for consultation to every researcher. However, some of the records requested by the researcher could not be accessed because they were still recorded as 'confidential', and because of certain technical problems. The ANM staff said that they had given some documents to the respective government departments to certify so that the public could access them. Unfortunately, the documents were not returned to the ANM. When the ANM staff tried to find out what had actually happened, it was found out that the documents were no longer at that office. Thus, the records of the agencies are still considered 'confidential' and not accessible to the public until they are returned/transferred back to the ANM (Habibah, 1987; AO, 2003).

***Notes on the Interviews:***

The researcher did not strictly follow the sequence of the questions in the interview guide during interviews because the participants could not provide objective answers within the frame of the semi-structured questions. The researcher felt the discussion could be made much more relaxed and the participants would be more responsive if she followed up the issues and situations which the participants had raised. At the same time, the

researcher made the effort to focus on the issues raised during the discussions, as Seidman (1991: 69) reminds us, 'the questions most used in an in-depth interview follow from what the participant has said.

During the course of the interviews, the participants showed a preference for talking about the best experience they had, which the researcher instantly took as an indication that they were not only controlling the issue of discussion but also when to stop talking about it. This became one of the constraints faced by the researcher in controlling the flow, progress and the focus of the interviews so that the discussion would not substantially deviate from the issues raised in the questions. For instance, when discussing questions regarding child welfare services, such as the children's home, EWO 5, who among the six participants was more involved in the services for children, could not vividly recall any of her experiences, which would otherwise, have provided significant answers. She repeatedly said, 'I can't remember, it's a long time ago'. The other constraint was that two out of six participants had declined to have their opinions on tape. Blaxter *et al*., (2001:173) note that, sometimes the researcher 'cannot afford or get access to tape recorder' and in this case note-taking was used instead.

***Other constraints involved:***

Conducting archival fieldwork was time consuming, and it does affect performance during the data collection process. As Tosh (2000) reminds us, there is a need to look into this problem seriously since research using primary sources can be painfully slow. Having a research assistant would have helped, as time spent in browsing the catalogues or indices could have been reallocated to other vital work such as scanning the materials found in selected files. Spending a lot of time and opening hundreds of files at the archives did not guarantee that the researcher was able to acquire as much data as required.

Although materials collected from the archives were abundant, the researcher had to learn what historians call the 'slash and burn' technique: making decisions as to what is relevant and what to throw away and which most sociologists and social scientists had either never come across or are not used to the idea (Steedman, 2003). It was actually a painful decision to leave out something that had been so difficult to acquire because it was not relevant. The researcher also learnt how to cross-reference between different kind of documents and sources (Steedman, 2003), considered an important aspect of the historical method. The researcher had not only anticipated problems with the amount of time this research demanded but also the high cost of travelling, photocopying, and administrative work involved. Due to time and financial constraints, the researcher was unable to visit all the state archives in Malaysia or to continue searching for valuable materials such as newspapers. However, the above-mentioned constraints did not 'dim' the researcher's enthusiasm to 'dwell' in the archives and discover the sort of data it had to offer. Although, the researcher had 'never set foot in a national archive, nor a county or public record office' (Steedman, 2001: x) before, as Jones (2001a) advises, she '*never* turned down the chance to research an archive', for such an experience has already fitted in her interest in continuing the work.

***Conclusion:***

This paper outlines the qualitative methodology used in the study of child welfare services in Malaya during the British colonial period of 1946-1957. The explication of the documentary and qualitative methodology above, which presented its justification and suitability for this study, could provide an alternative platform for researchers in social work who are keen to use archival sources in their study. Even though the method also revealed coherent and useful information that needed to be tackled, some of which were even unavoidable, researching archives may provide answers to questions, particularly those that confirm the origin of an event or a phenomenon.

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