Home Truths: Shifting Ethical Contours in Family Research

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Abstract

In this article I interrogate ethical issues that shape contemporary research in childhood and family studies. This aims to update existing literature in this area and reflect on the challenges posed by new approaches to the study of personal life, emotions and relationships. In particular the ethical issues posed by qualitative mixed-methods and psycho-social approaches. This requires us to consider carefully the threading together of data into individual and/or family case studies. It refines understandings of 'harm' and 'distress' and proposes that we accept unsettling narratives in research on emotional–social worlds. Ideas of 'responsible knowing' are reconfigured and a celebration of the messiness of everyday experience and relationality is advanced, including the acknowledgement of conflicting, unfavourable and difficult data as part of routine 'good enough' parenthood. The article draws on experiences and findings from empirical research with families living in the North of England. In the *Behind Closed Doors* project I interrogated different qualitative methods of researching family relationships and examined the conceptual frameworks through which we make sense of experiences and understandings of 'family intimacy'.

Key words: families, ethics, qualitative research, mixed-methods, psycho-social approaches

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Introduction

In mixed-methods research, like ethnographic study, the researcher inevitably becomes embedded in the personal worlds of those being researched. Spending significant amounts of time with a family means that you get to know them, to share some of their life experiences in the immediate sense – over time. This investment of time and self in others' lives can lead to *vested interest*; a commitment to participants comes into conflict with the academic need for a critical analytical mind. Feminist research has grappled with the 'push-me-pull-you' feelings which can emerge in first sharing then interpreting others' lives. In many ways debate around feminist research and methodologies is somewhat tired; the argument has been won and feminist ethics (in some form and variation) underpin the vast majority of social research. However new approaches to the study of family relationships and personal life require us to return to some of these debates, to reflect on the ethical and epistemological dilemmas that are faced by contemporary researchers in family studies.

In the first section of this article I outline existing ethical frameworks that have shaped families and childhood research, many of which coalesce around ideas of informed consent. I then move on to examine the challenges of new research approaches in the field of family studies and personal lives, notably qualitative mixed-methods research and psycho-social approaches. Mixed-methods research requires ethical and analytical processes to be revisited, in

particular the issues raised through the collection of multiple accounts of shared relationships. This focuses attention on the meaning and degrees of confidentiality assurances that can be made, especially in the context of case study analysis. I examine some of the arguments raised by sociologists against psycho-social research and examine the ways that psycho-social methods require us to reconsider the conflation of 'harm' and 'distress' in qualitative research. In the final section I return to feminist ideas on 'responsible knowing' and the researcher's role in advancing meanings and understandings of relationality and family lives. I propose that the multidimensional data collected in mixed-methods research does produce comprehensive accounts of experience that access the complexity of macro–micro, personal–social, emotional and physical connections. However I caution against the tendency to tidy up and sanitise the 'messiness' of everyday experience and relationality in order to produce academic knowledge. I suggest that if we keep in the multidimensional layers and narrative lose ends that characterise stories of individuals' emotional–social worlds, then we will paint a far more accurate picture of the uncertainties that shape and are shaped by everyday family relationships.

- **Research data**

The discussion advanced in this article draws on empirical findings from an ESRC-funded pilot project, *Behind Closed Doors* (RES-000-22-0854). This was a pilot project which had two key aims. The first was methodological, to interrogate different qualitative methods of researching intimacy in families, developing a mixed-methods approach. The second was conceptual, to

examine the frameworks through which we make sense of experiences and understandings of 'family intimacy'. Data were produced through the integration of different qualitative methods – diaries, emotion maps, biographical narrative interviews, vignettes, visual imagery, observation, and focus groups. Most of these methods are self explanatory but a couple may be unfamiliar. The emotion map is a technique that I devised especially for the project. This graphic method requires a floor plan of the family home to be created and a copy of this is given out to each participant along with a set of coloured emoticon stickers, representing happiness, sadness, anger, and love/affection. Each person (or intimate), including friends and pets in some cases, was designated a specific coloured sticker and participants placed these stickers on their floor plan, indicating where an emotion-exchange had occurred. This graphic material was analysed as data and also through recursive interviews participants talked about the interactions in more detail. A key merit of this kind of visual method is that it produces comparable data – from adults and children – in this case using a medium, a sticker chart, which is familiar to children and which is known to engage their interest.

The other method that may need more explanation is the biographical narrative interview. Psycho-social approaches are growing in popularity, proving particularly useful in the study of parenthood, families and relationships. This approach moves beyond the semi-structured 'conversation with a purpose' that is typical in much feminist sociological research. The 'free association narrative interview' (FANI) (Hollway and Jefferson 2000) or 'biographical narrative integrative method' (BNIM) (Wengraf 2001) aim to

explore the situated, experiential, and emotional context of participants' accounts and the ways that past experiences affect understandings and representations of self . BNIM and FANI approaches claim to empower participants by being wholly non-directive. The researcher typically asks the participant a single 'open' question at the start of the interview and the participant then takes the lead, talking freely about the experiences they chose, framed in their own terms of reference. During the interview the researcher adopts the role of active listener: they do not interject and/or reorient the narrative however this unfolds; their purpose is to be wholly non-directive (see Wengraf 2001 for a practical guide). In the Behind Closed Doors project this method was highly effective. Later on I return to some of the ethical questions posed by this psycho-social approach, especially around psychoanalytic interpretations of others' experience. The original research design stated that *all* methods were to be completed by *all* family members. It quickly became apparent that this was unrealistic for both practical reasons (in many families at least one individual did not want to participate), it was also disempowering. By being less prescriptive participants were afforded a degree of control over the research process.

Ethical issues in family research

There are particular ethical issues that arise in the study of family relationships and childhood, these include the vulnerability of the group (Elam and Fenton 2003), participants' age (Caskey and Rosenthal 2005) and the degree to which research intrudes on indiviudals' private life at home (Brannen 1988). In Western societies 'privacy of family life and couple

relationships is something that retains an especially strong currency' (Edwards 1993: 181). Methods, such as in-depth interviews, that are generally used without undue concern become subjected to far closer scrutiny when researching people's personal lives and relationships. This can include detailed 'risk assessments' through ethics research panels and the need to plan ahead for every eventuality. There are some general and agreed points of good practice.

Rigorous informed consent procedures should be in place (something that I return to in detail in the next section). 'Warm up' and 'wind down' activities should top and tail each meeting including a 'debrief' at the end of the project. Questions should acknowledge the feelings and situation of the participant and the researcher should be sensitive to the individual's verbal and non-verbal cues, and respond accordingly. The participant must be fully cognisant of how all their material will be used and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality should be discussed, including any limitations. All data and personal details should be securely deposited. Participants must be aware of what procedures are in place if concerns for an individual's safety arise, such as bullying or abuse. Information on external support agencies should be made available, as appropriate. The details of a contact person outside the research project should be provided so that a participant can talk through concerns about the conduct of the researcher and/or the research process. The researcher should also have this form of support available to them. In the analytical stages, caution should be exercised in handling and interpreting data in order to minimize misinterpretation and/or over-claiming findings.

Researchers must consider the effects that published work may have both for participants and for the wider social group to which they belong.

Formalised ethical codes of practice are laid down through various organisational, institutional and research funding bodies; for example in the UK, the British Sociological Association (BSA) http://www.britsoc.co.uk/equality/Statement+Ethical+Practice.htm or the Social Research Association (SRA) http://www.the-sra.org.uk/ethical.htm, and in the US, those issued by the Office of Human Subjects Research (OHSR) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) (see http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/index.html. These guidelines are often not intended to restrict research practice and/or the subject of study so much as steer the researcher through the 'risky' landscape of social research. Some find these guidelines useful, alerting the researcher to potential ethical issues which may be encountered (Punch 1986). Others suggest that they provide an artificial sense of ethical security which delimits the researcher's reflexive practice (Mason 1996); ethical approval processes and procedures fail to account for the tensions, fluidity and uncertainties that characterise empirical research of everyday lives (Birch et al. 2003: 1-2). Notwithstanding the debate on the relative merits of protocols, in the current cultural climate of risk assessment one thing is for sure, guidelines are here to stay and will only increase in scope and focus.

Family researchers tend to find a way to work *with* formalised codes of practice, recognising that it is hard to inscribe rules that address the breadth

and complexity of empirical studies. A multitude of decisions are made. 'Rarely are there specific ethical rules for how we make these decisions; rather we must draw on ethical principles in how best to act with integrity' (Daly 2007: 244). A ‘consequentialist’ ethical position is commonplace in family studies, wherein considerations around the greatest good to the greatest number of people are balanced against the individual ‘rights’ of the participant (see Holm 1997 for an overview of different ethical positions). This ethical framework is further refined through feminist standpoints, forming what has been termed as a ‘consequentialist-feminist-ethics’. A model wherein the researcher is implicated ‘in a feminist, caring, committed ethic’, shaped through long-term, trusting relationship between the researcher and those who are being studied (Denzin and Lincoln 1998: 39). This feminist, ‘ethics of care’ model inculcates the researcher within the production and generation of knowledge, foregrounding integrity.

- **Informed consent**

In the UK, concern with ethics and research practice has been reinvigorated in part through the ESRC Research Methods Programme (Wiles et al. 2006). However some of the thorniest issues in ethical research practice remain understandings and negotiations of informed consent and the extent to which assurances of confidentiality can be guaranteed when the richness and depth of data collected on an individual and/or a relationship is self-revealing. Formalised consent in some ways has become a pen-pushing exercise, oriented around risk management. In this sense it is the fear of litigation which

has focused the research mind on ethical issues far more than theoretical and/or politically-oriented factors.

Funding guidelines and the incumbent parameters imposed on research practice and dissemination of findings, combined with institutional anxieties around academic employees being sued for research malpractice, have shaped both the boundaries of research and research practice (Edwards and Mauthner 2002: 16-17). Taken to the extreme, this preoccupation with ethics – the need to protect ourselves and those who employ and/or commission our research – can paralyse research both in the field and in subsequent analysis of data. In practice, once paperwork has been signed it is *ongoing consent*, the relational contract between the researcher and the participant, which is crucial; an agreement based on trust and respect which stretches far beyond legal obligations and formalised risk assessments.

The process of research is necessarily dynamic, leading some to suggest that it may be more ethical to engage in a 'moral conversation' with participants rather than rely on formal informed consent procedures at all (Benhabib 1992). Re-negotiating informed consent on a continual basis does settle the ethical conscience but also does generate practical problems that cannot be disregarded. In repeatedly asking someone if they want to continue, it is likely that a significant number will be inclined to opt out (Duncombe and Jessop 2002). Researchers have to tread a fine line, respecting participants' rights on the one hand, while on the other, acknowledging the pragmatic need to keep people on board for the duration of a project. Issues around informed consent

become all the more tricky when researching childhood, not as a result of any lack of understanding on children's part but because their participation in any research is typically dependent on adult gatekeepers (Harden et al. 2000). Children's rights sometimes conflict with the parents' or carers' viewpoints (Hughes and Huby 2001) and in such cases children can be forbidden to take part in research. This leaves the researcher in the unenviable position, being legally bound to break off research contact even though young people may want to participate.

In family research, this kind of *generational* filtering is further compounded by *gendered* household power structures. In the Behind Closed Doors project, it was not only parents who made the final decision on whether families would participate, it was fathers who typically acceded to or blocked mothers' initial statement of interest. This was one of the factors behind the decision to lift the prerequisite condition that all family members should participate in the project. To continue with this strategy consolidated traditional gendered power structures and silenced the voices of women who wanted to talk. Though my decision compromised the degree to which comparative analysis could be made between families and in positivist terms invalidated the generalizability of findings, I could not, as a feminist researcher, refuse to listen to women's stories simply because their partner's were disinterested and/or disapproving. Approaching children as the first point of reference, through youth clubs, schools and community organisations, could have increased their levels of power and control, although in the context of a time-limited pilot project I concede I did not manage to pursue this route.

Mixed-methods research

A qualitative mixed-methods approach has been used to study children's lives for some while, with researchers developing participatory techniques that aim to capture young people's imagination, investing considerable time and energy in ways to minimize the adult–child power differential. Childhood researchers have developed creative methods that are typically oriented around task-centred activities (for example Clark and Moss 2001; Deacon 2000). Interviews with children aim to acknowledge the child's maturity, cultural background and level of understanding, encouraging children to talk about their lives from their own perspectives (Mauthner 1997). While some have questioned the need to create exclusively child-focused research techniques, arguing that by creating a separate canon of methods we simply duplicate wider social attitudes which position children as 'non-adult' and essentially different to adults (Harden et al. 2000). The richness of data generated through participatory approaches and the levels of engagement they can achieve have effectively proven their merit.

In family studies, a mixed-methods approach can broaden understandings of everyday life through the weaving together of inconsistencies, ambiguities and complimentary material on past and present relationships and intimate experience. Data from *Behind Closed Doors* produced a dynamic account of family relationships and routine practices of intimacy (see Gabb 2008). Diaries documented affective structures and routines, framed through individual and family repertoires of intimacy. Household emotion maps spatially located

intimate experience in the places around the home and beyond. Recursive interviews encouraged participants to think again about the choice and framing of these literary–graphic experiences, and to fill in the gaps. Open psycho-social narrative interviews enabled participants to orient the research agenda around their own life stories; recalling emotional stories that were significant for them. Subsequent semi-structured interviews picked up the narrative threads and introduced thematic research questions fashioned around the individual participant's account of intimate experience and relationality.

The ways that social policy, normative values and the discourses of risk and sexuality, shaped everyday experience and parents' understandings of intimacy and sexuality were explored through discussion of vignettes and images. Focus group discussion within families and between family and friends added another dimension to public–private boundary management and demonstrated family processes as opinions were negotiated among the group. Observations of everyday family practices illustrated how parents and children wanted to represent themselves, what 'performance' of family they chose to make public, and gave a glimpse of everyday interaction and the tensions that often live just beneath the surface. The 'integration' of these methods (Mason 2006) evinced the interiority of affective experience, the gendered, generational and subjective experience of family intimacy and the impact of external socio-cultural factors on 'private' life. Analysis was developed through individual portraits and multi-layered composites of family case studies. The richness of data available did make for fascinating analysis

but equally raised ethical questions around how to manage both the quantity and complex quality of material.

- **Confidentiality and case studies**

Studying the interpersonal relationships of parents and children inevitably raises ethical concerns around disclosure and confidentiality. These issues are especially troublesome because participants are simultaneously revealing identity publicly to the outside world and just as importantly privately, *among* family members (Larossa et al. 1981). Shared 'family stories' can appear markedly different when looked at from someone else's perspective; self perception and others' description are not ordinarily mirror images. Assurances of confidentiality are all but impossible to guarantee once individuals begin to talk about their personal lives and relationships. Even when family stories are not constructed from the constituent accounts of individuals, it is hard to protect the identity of someone from those around them – those who know their story. Cross-sectional analysis affords some degree of anonymity, but if a case-based study is important in the presentation of data and/or in advancing social understanding of a subject, then 'there is a profound conflict of interests between participant confidentiality and the wider interest in publicly available knowledge' (Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 91). This does not mean that the consequentialist ethical stance should be extended to its theoretical conclusion, that is to say the greater social good outweighing the rights of the individual participant and/or family group. Instead it requires that we work hard to balance these two factors, advancing social understanding through respectful, ethical research practice.

The complexity and *intensity* of qualitative mixed-methods data in the *Behind Closed Doors* project persuaded me to find a way through the ethical minefield. Case study data produced the vertical threads of a story. Cross-sectional analysis – across individual and family narratives, and the dataset as a whole – brought out the horizontal connections between different relational (social–personal) threads. 'The combining of mixed-methods data connects these different threads and weaves together the vertical and horizontal axes. Connections are forged between spatial and temporal dimensions as biographical, lifecourse, everyday, personal and social data are integrated, producing a holistic account of family and relational life' (Gabb 2008: 63). In many ways it would have been easier to sacrifice mixed-methods case study analysis as this would have alleviated much of the ethical uneasiness that continues to trouble me. However to forsake an approach to salve a researcher's conscience, when it is so evidently useful in the study of family relationships and everyday practices of intimacy is surely an ethical over-reaction. The challenge to family researchers is how to effectively manage the contradictions and divergence that will inevitably surface among a group and/or across case studies and work through issues of confidentiality with participants: to refine our ethical practice.

There are various tried and tested methods that can help to preserve confidentiality among individual members in case studies. Most aim to disrupt an individual and/or family narrative, making sure that personal and group narratives are separated. Themes can be addressed through summarised

accounts which are not attributed to a specific individual. Demographic details can be changed. Cases can be limited to the first person, omitting others' corroborative or dissenting commentaries. This diminishes the likelihood of distress caused by unfair or misinformed interpretations of others. In analysis of data from the *Behind Closed Doors* project I undertook all these strategies (and others besides), aiming to retain the integrity of the material and the stories being told, while following ethical research practice. I was most cautious about the cases I selected to join back together. In the end I produced only one 'family case study' and this was judiciously edited. My criteria for choosing this family, beyond them being an interesting case in point, included the daughter's age; she was 17 years old and therefore her participation was considered and mediated through understandings of 'informed consent'. Another factor was that the family were going through a period of transition on many levels and as a consequence were already engaged in an individual and collective reflexive process. All disclosures that were analysed were already known among the family group; new insights that emerged were explicitly stated as most welcome. Participatory methods completed early on in the research schedule performed a recursive function and facilitated individual reflection.

The sheer volume of data collected through mixed-methods research, per participant, per family, does however raise particular ethical questions. In analysis, in producing case studies from qualitative mixed-methods data, there is a need to edit, synthesize, paraphrase and summarise, all of which can lead to a narrativization of experience across the individual and/or family

dataset. The British Sociological Association (BSA) 'Statement of Ethical Practice' states that researchers have a duty to 'report their findings truthfully and accurately'. However analysis remains a subjective process; interpretations are seldom clear cut and weighing up my desire to produce ethically rigorous and academically challenging research often took place in splendid isolation, sitting at my desk, grappling with 'research outputs'. In the end, the key ethical question which I returned to over and again, was whether what I had crafted from the rich and multifaceted data, honoured the commitments previous made to the participants. Where there was uncertainty, I elected to 'jettison' some of the data (Mason 1996: 160).

The decision, to omit some sections of data, irrespective of how 'juicy' and/or intellectually interesting they may be, remains perhaps one of the hardest ethical decisions that a researcher is asked to make. In mixed-methods research the task is all the more challenging because the approach produces such interconnected comprehensive data; once something is omitted then the wider 'story' can quickly begin to unravel. One strategy that did prove to be most effective was to resist the temptation to tie up the experiential lose ends into overarching narratives. Refusing to pull together a picture from the composite pieces that were available was as important as constructing rich multi-layered portraits. The approach requires a delicate balancing act; threading together the connections offered by the participant whilst resisting narrative interpretations that breech confidentiality or which remain either speculative and/or derive from external sets of meanings. It is this latter point

which perhaps rings the loudest ethical alarm bells for many sociologists and which are at the forefront of objections to psycho-social rseearch.

Ethics and psychosocial research

Psycho-social approaches are growing in popularity and have been shown to be particularly useful in the study of parenthood, families and relationships (Phoenix and Hollway 2008; Roseneil 2006; Thomson and Kehily 2008). The biographical narrative integrative method (BNIM) (Wengraf 2001) and free association narrative interview (FANI) (Hollway and Jefferson 2000) techniques have been developed to examine the interplay between the psychic and the social, located in the cultural context and biography of the individual (Roseneil 2006: 851). BNIM and FANI methods share underlying principles, suggesting that in the course of an interview the participant will reveal to the researcher the *significance* of experiences and/or events. It is the researcher's role to trace connections between a participant's descriptions (Hollway and Jefferson 2000), and in so doing to reach *shared meanings*. In the first instance I want to address ethical questions around the process of data collection in psycho-social approaches before I move on to more substantive concerns.

In the *Behind Closed Doors* project it was clear that a psycho-social interview approach did enhance disclosure. The open narrative interview facilitated: 'the opening up of the participant to themselves, focusing their attention on potentially novel emotional connections' (Gabb 2008: 53). Some participants did recount difficult and/or painful experiences and some of these may have

been previously 'unprocessed' to a lesser or greater. For the individual participant however this emotional unburdening did generally appear to be and was explicitly described by some as a positive experience; findings that corroborate Hollway and Jefferson's claim that it can be 'reassuring and therapeutic to talk about any upsetting event in a safe context' (Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 87). While this unearthing of experiences and emotions does cause alarm in some sociological quarters, these anxieties pertain to the association of the interview with catharsis, akin to a psycho-therapeutic encounter (Brannen 1988), more than to the specificity of research approaches which address sensitive emotionally-intense subjects.

While I would want to distance my research practice from associations with therapy and/or counselling, all interviews aim to elicit disclosure. When a high level of rapport and trust is established between a researcher and participant, it is accepted that individuals are likely to disclose information and feelings which they might have preferred to keep private or hidden (Duncombe and Jessop 2002). In FANI and BNIM research, the main difference is that the unstructured interview format simply affords participants *more space* to think through personal and relational connections in their lives. As Hollway and Jefferson say, 'the [psychosocial] interview provided the context of a relationship with someone who was capable of listening... was not competing for attention, who could reflect back in questions and comments a recognition of [the participant's] experiences... and by whom she did not feel judged' (Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 87).

Hollway and Jefferson claim that the method does not pose a problem in itself, instead, they suggest, we should redress ethical protocols which emphasize the need to avoid causing 'harm' and 'distress'. They point out that talking about emotionally significant events can be highly distressing for some individuals but that being distressed in this way is quite distinct from being harmed. The two terms, normally conjoined in ethical protocols, need to be separated. Participants are not powerless in research; they can chose to delimit disclosure, close down steams of thought, steer away from personal stories and redirect the narrative. Indeed these strategies are acknowledged as commonplace and represent the mainstay of psychoanalytically-informed readings of the unconscious through the interview text. To suggest however that psycho-social methods 'will encourage interviewees to divest hitherto unknown "stories" and memories after only a few hours of contact is arguably naïve and derives from a culture of risk assessment more than an ethical response to research practice' (Gabb 2008: 25).

In all forms of research on relational life, it is important to bear in mind that 'emotions are a normal part of talking about family experience' (Daly 2007: 251); it is unrealistic to expect all of these emotions to be wholly positive. It is how researchers *respond* to emotional disclosures that needs careful management, providing an empathetic listener who does not offer advice or solutions to problems and who refrains from making moral judgements even when opinions challenge our own beliefs and understandings. In this sense psycho-social interviews are not that different to sociological counterparts.

It remains the *interpretive* aspect of the psycho-social approach which sets it apart and that represents the biggest epistemological stumbling block. A psycho-social researcher is interested in looking for the story behind the story, searching for connections within the interview 'text' that may be unknown or unacknowledged by the individual – 'the defended subject'. For many sociologists, this oversteps the ethical mark and affords unmediated power to the researcher's meaning-making. Is it the researcher's place to identify someone else's subjectivity for them? There is resistance to this kind of 'over-interpretation' of participants' stories of selfhood (Roseneil 2006: 865) because it implies that the researcher can decipher from a few hours of interaction more about an individual than they may know about themselves. In the end the legitimacy of the approach is dependent on the theoretical and/or disciplinary standpoint of the researcher; a 'debate' that is longstanding and one which I do not want to enter into here.

What is clear from the findings of *Behind Closed Doors* is that the approach is particularly useful in eliciting rich and wide ranging individual accounts on relational experience. In the project, at the beginning of the interview, a single 'question' was posed to participants: 'Tell me about significant emotional events in your life'? The stories and narrative connections that followed tripped back and forth across the lifecourse and included experiences of happiness, elation, sadness and grief, framed through unremarkable ordinary events of everyday relational life. Careful handling of the interview encounter and sensitivity on the part of the researcher ensured that any distress that was caused was 'managed' through standard ethical protocols. Data generated

through the biographical narrative (psycho-social) interviews were combined with other qualitative research material from other methods.

A mixed-methods approach lends itself to a recursive strategy, taking data back to participants and co-constructing meanings with individuals through follow up methods. Rather than look for inner meanings which may be unknown to the individual, the analysis of mixed-methods data through an integrative approach explores connections within individual participants' narratives through different forms of data and presentations of self; how they made sense of their emotional worlds. Methodological and conceptual themes were interwoven to explore complexity. These meanings may be known to a lesser of greater extent by the individual, after all most participants are not trained in analytical techniques and may be more or less self aware, but in the *Behind Closed Doors* project I did not *interpret* what they said through sets of theorising that afford external meanings to data, as interview texts. This does not mean that my sociological analysis is likely to be any more or less in tune with how a participant may see themselves and/or how they would like to be seen. 'It is important to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth that sociologists probably often produce analyses which are not congruent with their subjects' own self identifications' (Roseneil 2006: 865). But I do contend that through this approach I was able to capitalise on the methodological potential of psycho-social approaches without recourse to more problematic psycho-analytically-informed interpretation.

Telling it like it is?: Responsible 'knowing'

The way that I have used and framed psycho-social research returns us to wider epistemological issues. Methodological discussion about ethical issues in research practice tends to be set apart from theoretically-oriented work which is framed in philosophical or epistemological terms. Doucet and Mauthner advocate the bringing together of these two strands, linking ethics, methods, methodologies and epistemologies. In this way, they argue, it is possible to 'know well', 'know responsibly' and attain a high degree of 'epistemic responsibility' (Doucet and Mauthner 2003: 139). In this last section I would like to suggest that ethical and 'responsible knowing' can be enhanced through methodological and epistemological 'messiness' in family studies research.

A preoccupation with ethical concerns of rapport and reflexivity in research has in some ways delimited critical sociological analysis: 'There is a contradiction in aiming for ultimate rapport and yet treating the person's account both critically and sociologically' (Measor 1985: 63). Power cannot be removed from the interview encounter; to unduly focus on ethical claims and counter-claims around reciprocity and interaction misrepresent the realities of research. It shifts the emphasis away from legitimate concerns over researcher integrity onto concerns with 'likeability': will participants feel comfortable and agree with and *like* what we have said about them. Such concerns have become overriding factors in how data is interpreted and how presentations of others' lives are constituted. As Kerry Daly argues, we need to keep in check the individual and/or external impetus to tidy up the picture of

everyday life that is produced through qualitative research. To resist the temptation to sanitise arguments in a way that 'strips negative cases, conflicting viewpoints, contradictions, or ambiguity in our results':

> '...when we study individuals and families, we are confronted with the "messiness" of their everyday realities... When we recognize that life experience is messy, we may do well, in our portrayals of that experience, to hold onto some of that messiness in our writings' (Daly 2007: 259-260).

Presenting 'unfavourable' data on families who gave so much of their time and themselves to our research can make feel like betrayal. I want to suggest that in 'telling it like it is', we are not letting 'our' participants down, in fact the opposite. In the *Behind Closed Doors* project parents did go to considerable lengths to demonstrate their positive investment in parent–child relationships and family life was typically oriented around children. Parents were proud of this investment and saw it as a crucial part of ‘being there’ for their children (Gillies et al. 2001). The child-centred account of families that emerged, structured around agency, cultural capital and emotional capacity, presented a selfless account of dedicated parenthood, mirroring the idealised model promoted through policy discourses and parenting handbooks. This altruistic versioning of parenthood was not however the whole picture nor was it always designed to benefit children.

Parents' actions often aimed both to provide emotional rewards for children and to transmit *their* value systems. Assessments of risk were used to legitimize parents' imposition of their rules and moral codes of conduct. Strategies of mutual disclosure and the closeness of the parent–children relationship were sometimes used to gratify a parent's emotional need and/or advance parental aspirations. Reading through the data again and again, it was clear that these *purposeful parenting strategies* and *instrumental forms of intimacy* did not undermine the quality of parents' care or question the overriding picture of 'happy families' that was presented; instead parents' 'strategic practices of intimacy' were simply part of the complex picture of family relationships. To edit out sections that painted a not so rosy portrait only serves to delimit understandings of relational life and obscure the materiality of everyday parent–child intimacy (Gabb 2008: 109-110).

In paper presentations of findings, my decision to identify *emotional instrumentality* as part of everyday family practices was however characterised by some as a potential breech of trust, coming dangerously close to the limits of ethical boundaries around researcher–participant respect. I cannot agree. To suggest that anything less than parental selflessness is potentially damaging orients the study of family relationships solely around the *needs of children*, a perspective that has been effectively contested (Lawler 2000). In the *Behind Closed Doors* project I was interested to explore intergenerational dimensions of family life, including the gendered and generational patterning of intimacy. As with previous work on lesbian parent families (Gabb 2004b; Gabb 2005a), I was interested in studying ordinary

experiences of parenthood; to interrogate everyday family relationships – 'warts and all'.

In some ways my research is politically motivated. I want to draw attention back to ideas of ‘good enough parenting' that are currently being subsumed beneath abundant mediations of ways to improve parent-child relationships; mediations that serve to admonish ‘bad parents’ and stigmatise those who are getting it wrong. Discourses that are narrow in scope and shaped through assumptions on class, privilege and choice (Gillies 2006). I contend that if we are to understand family processes, how family members relate to one another, then we need to examine multidimensional family life, including parenting strategies and parent–child relationships which are neither physically or emotionally harmful nor altruistic and wholly positive. The gap between conventional understandings of ‘good' and 'bad' parenting is enormous and most family practices reside in this hinterland.

I suggest that in some instances the deference to ethical principles in family studies research has led to unnecessarily rigid interpretative strategies that structure how we present family lives. The need to *demonstrate* trust and respect has led researchers in the fields of family and childhood studies to obscure the messiness of lived lives. The *compulsion* to demonstrate good ethical practice has meant that troublesome ‘realities’, and I use that word with considerable caution and a barrage of quote marks, are edited out of accounts of family relationships. The picture painted is seeped in good intentions. My argument is that this conceals the complexities of lived experience. This

generative research practice is not motivated solely by researcher integrity so much as the current climate of risk assessment. As researchers, we often uncover uncomfortable 'home truths' both about the social world and individuals' motivations and practices that constitute and produce everyday life. Recently the tendency is to cover over this 'warts and all' picture of ordinary family life.

In some ways my reservations echo earlier concerns raised by Martyn Hammersley, who questioned the growing preoccupation with ethics in social research, suggesting that taken to the extreme, ethical concerns *could* and in many cases *do* shape research:

> 'Whereas previously ethical considerations were believed to set boundaries to what researchers could do in pursuit of knowledge, now ethical considerations are treated by some as constituting the very rationale of research' (Hammersley 1999: 18).

To preserve anonymity, accounts told to us in the privacy of an interview are carved up, separated from others, repackaged under different names and references to third parties are removed. All of these measures are aimed at honouring confidentiality agreements between the participant and the researcher, protecting those who have re-presented their lives to us. However one eventual outcome of this protective strategy is that stories of family lives become disjointed; the dissected fragments of personal accounts are shuffled beyond recognition – but at considerable analytical cost.

In published work from the *Behind Closed Doors* study (Gabb 2008) I tried to find a way to honour researcher–participant trust while capitalising on the richness of data and retaining the complexity of family life that was on the pages in front of me. All participants were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality as far as is possible. Where certain words or phrases may disclose identity I replaced these with more generic terms that conveyed the meaning of the account while preserving anonymity. However other intra-family identifying factors have been left in. The age/maturity of children is a constitutive factor in shaping and understanding experiences of sexuality and intimacy in families therefore I included the age of children next to their pseudonym when using excerpts from their data. Each family was assigned a number (ranging from F1 to F10) and these were placed next to all quotations so that emergent narratives and methodological patterns both within and across families can be traced. This was not sloppy ethics on my part nor does it breach ethical guidelines; it does however challenge the tendency in family studies to be 'over-protective' towards participants. To be clear I did not reveal any information that was highly sensitive, case studies were woven back together only when I was sure that disclosures made in the research were already known among the family group. Multiple strategies designed to protect participants' anonymity were undertaken, as detailed earlier on.

I am not advocating that we cast aside ethical procedures and ride roughshod over those whose lives are shared with us. What I am suggesting is that we may have overstepped both what is required of us and what participants'

reasonably expect. In the *Behind Closed Doors* project everyday parenthood and everyday experiences and practices of intimacy painted a dynamic and complex picture of family relationships. To restrict the methods we use 'just in case' they recall an upsetting experience or to omit sections that paint a not so rosy in case we offend an individual or show a family as anything less than 'good enough', delimits understandings of relational life and obscures the materiality of everyday parent–child intimacy. Tying up all the narrative loose ends too tightly shuts down understandings and obscures the temporality of family relationships. To retain the methodological and emotional 'messiness' of relational and everyday lives is neither a failing nor incompleteness in family research but represents life as it is lived: contingent, shifting and always moving. Ethics provide the framework for completing research and analysis; they shape how we make sense of relational worlds without restricting interpretation and/or our characterisation of them.

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