

It has been a great opportunity to participate in an infant observation seminar and, with the group and also Ann Phoenix and Heather Elliott from the research team, to learn from it in the context of its use for a different purpose from usual; that of the generation and analysis of empirical data in the service of understanding the identity processes involved in becoming mothers for the first time. I want to take this opportunity to thank Cathy Urwin who has brought to bear her considerable experience, not only of infant observation but also empirical research, to guide this part of the research. I think that this is the first time that this method has been used in a research project funded by the social science research council and so it is quite an important innovation in the history of UK social science research. We are still digesting the implications of using the infant observation method for research, having not yet finished the project, and I will reflect here on what is beginning to come clear and on the questions that are hovering and have yet to be brought into full focus.

Our research questions reflected the several theoretical frameworks that can inform an understanding of identity processes: we wanted to know about women's experience of becoming mothers, how dimensions of social difference such as ethnicity, religion, culture, age and class impacted on their changing identities and how they were positioned by expert discourses that were available through health and social services and media. We also wanted to know how identifications worked in the identity transition to becoming a mother for the first time. It was this last question that seemed to require methodological innovations, since the psychoanalytic concept of identification assumes unconscious intersubjective dynamics and these are not brought to light in conventional social science research methods using largely word-based methods. We wanted also to learn about the embodied, unconscious, taken-for-granted and practical aspects of identity formation and change.

The fieldwork involved a combination of free association narrative interviews and infant observation. These interviews are, as their name suggests, based on the psychoanalytic principle of free association and thus aimed to go beyond the intentional narratives that are in danger of only revealing what interviewees consciously wish to know or show about themselves (see Hollway and Jefferson 2000, 2004). With regard to these interviews, each of the twenty women was interviewed three times, first ante-natally, focusing on the story and meanings of the pregnancy as well as anticipations of birth and motherhood, and twice after her baby was born. The second interview took place around four months after the baby's birth. It focused on the birth, changes and issues since birth and the mothers' evolving identities as their babies did more for themselves. The final interview was held around the baby's first birthday. The interviews are analysed using an interpretative methodology that pays attention to the 'whole' narrative, to the meanings produced in the researcher-participant relationship, links between

parts of the account and to conflicts and tensions within accounts. Themes can then be extracted and looked at across the whole set and subsets of the sample.

Why did we decide not to rely wholly on interviewing? Despite the principles of the FANI method, I had begun to wonder about the extent of its limitations that inhere in the way that any interview method depends on an individual's narrative, based in language. Despite its capacity to elicit free associations, it must share some of the weaknesses of any talk-based method: by eliciting a mode of communication that is to a great extent under conscious control, perhaps there is too much of a tendency to reproduce the image of a rational, unitary, discursive subject. These are the assumptions on which interview methods are usually based and, I reasoned, would tend to reproduce images of identity that were limited to the conscious and intentional, to what could be reflected upon, symbolised and brought into discourse.

Therefore, the research was designed so as to produce complementary sets of data for some of the same participants: alongside the interviewing method, six of the twenty women agreed to be observed every week for the first year of their babies' lives and, as Cathy Urwin has described in her editorial, this took place in the manner of a classic infant observation. However, we adapted the method in two fundamental ways: from a training method to a research method and from observing babies (in the mother baby couple) to observing mothers (in that couple). In practice, this did not make much difference. For example, the observers would normally stay with the baby if the mother was in a different room, or if she was out and someone else was looking after the baby. This was justified in terms of the significance of the relation of mother and baby as the object of study – as opposed to the idea of the mother as a separate individual. It also meant that we got access to many other family members when they were caring for the babies. The research design also remained faithful to the method's principles in not using mechanical recording devices but writing up detailed notes after each session. Crucially, as in the traditional method, these notes formed the basis of the observation seminar, whose purpose, as usual, was to help the observer and the group as a whole to process their experiences.

These principles are finely exemplified in the preceding papers and it is fitting that the data were written up as single cases in the first instance. My experience of participating in the observation seminar had effects on my research practice, both as an interviewer and in the way that I engaged with the data. I had learned further ways of paying attention to the unconscious communications of mothers (and babies) expressed unwittingly through their bodies and experienced by me at a feeling level. The practice of infant observation has always been based on a different epistemology to traditional social science methods: on the use of the observer's subjectivity as an instrument of knowing. Observers become skilled at using their own responses to what they are experiencing as a way of understanding the emotional significance of the event, in other words, use of their countertransference responses. This seems a necessary research skill for the

understanding of identity transitions which, shorn of their emotional content, would be pale imitations of what is significant about them. Moreover the form of learning that it offers the researchers and observers is based on the very same processes that it assumes to be the basis of mother-infant communication: projective identification. I learned about the unconscious intersubjective dynamics involved for new mothers and their babies at the same time as getting better at using my own subjectivity as an instrument of research knowledge. For example, in any situation involving group analysis of data, I always now suggest that the passage is read out loud, following the practice in the observation seminar, even if each person has read it individually in preparation. Many social scientists are surprised: isn't this just a duplication of task? I have found – and others tend to agree when they have experienced it – that this shared reading enables the emotional tone of the information to be communicated. It helps the group to approach through the feeling of the data, as Cathy Urwin emphasised in her leadership of the observation seminar, and it also helps each individual make good use of the group.

More specifically, the style and form of infant observation notes has therefore been influential in the way that we write up our field notes after interview visits<sup>1</sup>. Long after the immediacy of the visit has faded, they can bring back to life the whole scene and the feelings that accompanied it. (Following one of those hasty emails that are not checked for typos, by one member of the team, I have a new methodological word in my vocabulary, 'feel notes', to refer to these! This seems appropriate for a methodology based on the principle of using researchers' subjectivity as an instrument of knowing.) These provide a vehicle for us to reflect on our own subjective responses and what this means about the participant and our own insights and blindspots. I have become better at separating description from evaluation and recognising the value of rich, experience-near description; also what bodies express that is beyond words. In sum I have become a better observer and by extension a better ethnographer.

The wish to investigate the use of researcher subjectivity as an instrument of knowing was one reason we chose psychoanalytically-informed methods (as I have briefly described also in the case of the interview method). At an epistemological level, this involves re-theorising terms like subjectivity and objectivity, reliability and validity as part of a debate which is not only new but contentious to many social scientists. We need to ensure that this use of subjectivity safeguards both research ethics and what conventionally was called 'objectivity'. The six preceding cases demonstrate an ethical principle, based on

---

<sup>1</sup> Two other influences have complemented the infant observation method here: the first has been the hermeneutic interpretation method which is used as the basis for group data analysis in the International Research Group for Psycho-Societal Analysis, a European group of which Heather Elliott and I are members; the second is the field note and data analysis style, informed by ethnography and group analysis, evolving in another Open University research project within the Identities and Social Action programme, also on mothering identities. We conduct data analysis groups with our sister project led by Rachel Thomson with Mary Jane Kehily 'the Making of Modern Motherhoods.

recognition (Benjamin 1995, Hollway and Jefferson 2000 chapter 5), which goes beyond the often mechanistic strictures of research ethics codes. In relation to objectivity, the observation seminar – and other opportunities for group data analysis that we have built in – affords opportunities to examine our assumptions about the meaning of the data and revise these in the light of others' contributions. 'Objectivity' is not the opposite of 'subjectivity' but a state of knowledge, never fully accomplished through any method, that involves setting aside one's own investments, so as to be open to receive the meanings communicated by another person. Field notes provide one of the means for reflecting on our own subjective involvement in the participant and her situation and for asking, often with the help of the group, what belongs to her and what belongs to me. Beyond what can be achieved both intra- and inter-subjectively, access to the information provided by the two methods has provided a fascinating form of triangulation on a given mother's identity transition, each with different strengths. The case studies in this special issue were written independently of any information gained within the interviews: researchers' participation in the seminar group was conditional on this principle. The job of bringing together the knowledge provided by both methods is the task of the research team.

The observation method was intended therefore to enable us to see identities that are less the product of conscious, intentional production through narrative, more sensitive to affect, to unconscious intersubjectivity and to embodied aspects of identity. This has broadly turned out to be the case. However, it is worth pointing out that words spoken in an interview do not only provide semantic information. In the fourteen cases where participants were not observed it was possible to learn a great deal about the mothers' changing emotional states from the interview material. As I have said, this was richly supplemented with fieldnotes. I have also made it central to my data analysis practice to listen to audio recordings and never rely wholly on transcripts, since the spoken narrative holds a plenitude of information about embodied states, as it does about unconscious intersubjectivity. In a similar way to how interviews can provide information that goes beyond discourse, so observations are often bursting with talk, including information of the kind that is likely to be provided in interviews (about recent visits to the GP, weaning, sleeping patterns etc).

It is rare, in reading the information provided by each of the two methods about a particular mother, that they contradict each other, or even pull in different directions. However, they often cast complementary lights on the same theme, enabling some confirmatory triangulation and at the same time some refinement of our analysis. It is particularly gratifying when one or other method leads to strong hunches about something that were not able to be further verified from within those data, only to be confirmed by something explicit from the other method. For example, Ferelyth Watt comments 'my visits over the next couple of months indicated that Calise was preoccupied with some internal turmoil that I could only get evidence of through my countertransference and by observing the

behaviour of her parents' (page ref). What might have precipitated this remained a mystery. However the interviewer was told of how, during this period, Davy had been taken to hospital when he lost consciousness. She was at college in a class (hence with her phone turned off) and it was several hours before she arrived to see him with oxygen mask and wires sticking out all over him. She hardly left his bedside for four days, although Lindell would take over when she needed to shower and change. After this, she decided she had to give up college, which given her serious commitment to being a successful student must have been a serious blow. Calise's interview account (some time after the event) was measured and controlled but its length and the horrifying detail of Davy's suffering amply conveyed how traumatic this period had been. Perhaps nearer the time, when Ferelyth would have visited her, the whole event was still too upsetting to talk about. However, Ferelyth knew through other than narrative means. This example illustrates the complementary strengths of the two methods.

Two further aspects of the observation method are striking. First is the way that the method captures the mundane practices (and the emotions that are inextricable from these) involved in the going-on-being of mother and baby over time. This is generally not what is expressed in words. Second, a weekly visit succeeds in recording the ups and downs involved in identity change processes. These will necessarily be smoothed out in the generalisation that is required for a narrative of events between interview visits where the gap is several months.

Becoming a mother involves conflictual dynamics that are not necessarily represented in words. The way that these mothers' identity processes are understood is, not surprisingly therefore, more in line with psychoanalytic theory: recognising of unconscious conflict, changing over time and fluid and more embodied. Its concept of relationship is different (not two separate individuals interacting but two selves engaged unconsciously in communication, holding and transforming parts of each other). However, our approach to the understanding of identities is not psychoanalytic. Rather it is psychosocial which, in this usage, draws on psychoanalytic principles (both ontological and epistemological). However, these need to be set within the many aspects of social context – not just relational but spatial and not just life historical but recognising the impact of welfare provision, socio-economic position, racism and islamophobia, not just the capacity to symbolise but the availability and inaccessibility of certain discourses and discursive practices which provide different positionings for women in the process of becoming mothers. Some of these aspects can be more successfully elicited through unstructured narrative interviewing that allows the participant's associations to structure the account.

The observation method can also produce data that are richly descriptive, situated in space and time, particularly within the family and more broadly in the London borough from where all the participants were found (we have omitted some specificity in these case studies in order to preserve anonymity). For

example, several mothers moved a lot between the family home of their parents or parents in law and their own flat (either shared with their husband or occupied on their own). The change in settings was hugely informative because we saw them situated differently as daughters, sisters, aunts, wives, at the same time as being new mothers. This is complemented by the interview method, which makes it possible to find out more consistently about ways in which mothers use the local facilities and inhabit their wider spatial environment.

Finally, it is one of the strengths of the observation method that the integrity and uniqueness of each single case is preserved and forms the basis of further analysis. But the research project necessitates some comparative analysis since its design is based upon our interest in understanding how mothers with different ethnicities and class positions experience their identity transition into motherhood. It is often thought that small collections of complex single cases rule out generalisation. I believe that, despite their uniqueness, it is possible to extrapolate, but it has to be achieved via conceptual development rather than through statistical generalisation (Hollway 2004, Dreher 2000). To do is one of the remaining challenges.