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## **Acting up and acting out: encountering children in a longitudinal study of mothering**

**Rachel Thomson, Lucy Hadfield, Mary Jane Kehily and Sue Sharpe**

### **Abstract**

Despite a proliferation of research exploring children's lives and relationships over the past two decades, there is a notable absence of research which explores family relationships from the perspective of very young children (age 0-3). This paper reports on data emerging from a study of new mothering with a particular focus on very young children's active engagement with wider family narratives. The study employs a qualitative longitudinal design, and women have been followed from pregnancy into motherhood. Most recently we have attempted to document a 'day in the life' of the mothers using participant observation techniques. This approach has enabled us to capture the emergence of the child (around 2 years old). This paper focuses on examples of interaction between researcher, mother and child relating to food, exploring how researcher subjectivity can be interrogated as a source of evidence regarding the place of the child within the research and family dynamic including examples of 'acting up' and acting out' on the part of all participants.

**Keywords:** Children; psycho-social, participant observation; day in a life; work shadowing; researcher subjectivity, mobile methods, qualitative longitudinal, mothers, food.

## **Introduction**

It has been argued that the ‘mother’ is strangely elusive in psychological research, eclipsed by the powerful psycho-analytic formulation of mother-and-child, or simply by ideas of maternal lack and intergenerational transmission (Baraitser 2008). Within sociological research the mother may be eclipsed by another set of categories, as she is seen as a vehicle for the re-making of social class distinctions through her practices, choices and dispositions (Clarke 2004, Byrne 2006) or as embodying historically situated discursive possibilities (Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg 2000, Brannen et al. 2004). Similar arguments have been made about children, produced within the research record as exemplars of developmental processes (James and Prout 2002). The new sociology of childhood has grown up around the project of representing the child as it ‘is’, rather than as a ‘becoming’, seeking to recognise agency and the immediacy, texture and diversity of children’s lives that is flattened out through models of normal childhood and transition. The challenge of capturing the co-existent emergent experiences of motherhood and childhood, which are distinctive yet utterly enmeshed is a serious challenge to social researchers, with implications for methodology, the focus of empirical and analytic attention and ultimately for the theoretical frameworks within which understandings and/ or explanations are claimed.

In this paper we report on data emerging from a longitudinal study of new mothering, focussing on observational data through which we captured the emergence of the child as an active presence within the research. We draw data together across 6 case studies, exploring

interactions between researcher, mother and child relating to food. We do this in order to point to the value of an ethnographic mode for researching very young children and to suggest how researcher subjectivity can be interrogated as rich source of evidence about the place of the child within the research and family dynamic. We illustrate how the attention of researchers moves between direct and indirect engagement with the child, and between adult and child centred activities, giving rise to reactions ('acting up') from both mothers and children. We also suggest that a form of 'acting out' is also evident where children perform identities and roles for and with the researcher that are intimately bound up with wider family narratives.

### **A longitudinal study of the transition to new motherhood**

The longitudinal study on which we draw began in 2005, capturing the transition to first time motherhood for a diverse group of UK women, aged between 15 and 48. The first stage of the study<sup>i</sup> began with one-to-one qualitative interviews with 62 women, in the late stages of pregnancy. Twelve of these women were chosen as family case histories, which involved conducting additional interviews with grandmothers and significant others, and a subsequent interview approximately 1 year after birth (Thomson and Kehily 2008). In a subsequent stage of the study we have followed 6 of these case studies, conducting an observational day in a life with mother and child during 2008 and most recently conducting repeat interviews with grandmothers, significant others and mothers. Although the earlier stage of the study relied primarily on in depth interviews (supplemented with visual prompts and the photographing of preparations for parenthood), in the second stage of the study we have had the opportunity to experiment with methodologies, enriching the data record and capturing

different temporal registers (see Holland et al 2006 and Thomson and Holland 2005, Thomson et al. 2002). This has included conducting object based interviews with grandmothers where they have been invited to talk about objects representing their past and their future, and ‘iterative interviews’ with mothers where they are invited to reflect on earlier comments from interviews. Here we focus on the day in a life observations conducted in 2008.

### **A day in the life**

The focus of the study had been emphatically on the new mother. Yet the emergent child’s presence was evident from the earliest stages in heavily pregnant bodies and the creation of environments for the baby in the form of preparations for birth and beyond. Babies were often around during the interviews conducted one year after birth, and interviewer and interviewee struggled to recapture the kind of quiet reflective space that had previously been possible in one to one interviews. Conversations tended to be arranged so that the mother was able to ‘escape’ the child for long enough to talk to the researcher, but were frequently curtailed by interruptions. Our field notes for these interviews are infused with the presence of the child and our attempts to negotiate space to speak directly to the mother. Our decision to include an observational element in the next stage of data collection was motivated both by our awareness of the practical difficulties associated with conducting a recorded interview with the mother of a small child, but also by our desire to embrace the complex relationality of the mothers’ new environment and to make this the focus of our gaze.

The approach that we took to documenting a day in the life of the mothers was informed by traditions of ethnographic research, participant observation and the kind of ‘shadowing’ of individuals that is part of organisational research. We asked mothers whether they would allow us to spend an ordinary day with them. Researchers did not enter the field with a directive to focus exclusively on either the child or the mother, rather our aim was to experience something of the role of the mother over the course of a day and changing settings. Apart from a digital camera we took no recording devices into the field. Our intention was to use the camera (which also recorded the time at which the picture was taken) as an aide memoire, helping us recall the structure of the day and defining discreet episodes. In practice the taking of photographs was negotiated with participants and enabled us to communicate the focus of the observation and to some extent share the project of constructing knowledge. Detailed ethnographic notes were written immediately on return from the fieldwork, and these accounts (including photographs) were shared with the wider research group. The team were also conscious that they were constructing a longitudinal data archive that would be available for secondary analysis, so we ensured that photographs were of *things* rather than people, and the ethnographic account was written in such a manner as to avoid identification of specific people and places.

The access provided to us by the six mothers varied. The longest observation took place over a 12 hour stretch from 7.30 am – 7.30 pm, and the shortest 5 hours from 9.40 – 2.40. One mother chose to record her own day through photographs and then these formed the foundation for an extended recorded interview. Mothers’ interpretations of an ‘ordinary’ day also differed and the research team were flexible encouraging mothers to share time in a way that they felt comfortable with. One mother invited her to shadow her during a working day

that involved the pick up and drop off with carers. Another chose the observation for one of her rare 'mummy days' at home. Another full-time working mother chose to document a Saturday at home with partner and child. Consistent with the method of shadowing a individual or role, our observations tended to involve movement through a number of settings, including the home, journeys by foot or car, parks, playgroups, nurseries, shops and the homes of friends/ family. Movement between settings revealed different aspects of both the mother and child's worlds. Domestic spaces tended to be dominated by toys, and researchers were frequently drawn into playing with children. Travel from one space to another tended to be a time for communication with the mother, with children pacified and distracted by the sensation of motion and/or by the stimulation and freedom of a changing environment. In more formal settings such as playgroups researchers tended to be left alone as mothers engaged with friends and children engaged with each other. Contained spaces such as shops, cafes and buses produced a particular set of complicated interactions, where children's behaviour or presence were exposed to public scrutiny and comment and children themselves drew on the public nature of the environment in their 'performances'. Researchers interacted freely with mother, child and others encountered. The researcher explained their presence as felt appropriate, initially to the child and subsequently to others such as family members, friends and childcare workers. The extent to which mothers helped in these negotiations differed by case. Perhaps the most delicate interactions were the child care/ play environments where researchers needed to be placed as trusted individuals rather than potentially dangerous or surveillant 'strangers'.

It is difficult to locate our particular appropriation of the 'day in a life' method within a wider literature. Capturing accounts of ordinary days as a way of building an 'esoteric

synthesis' of the diverse practices of everyday life has a long tradition within social research going back to the Mass Observation studies of the 1930's and the anthropological 'fieldwork' that this study took as inspiration (Hubble 2006, Jennings et al. 1987). Our commitment to full immersion, recording field notes ourselves after the observation connects our approach to a feminist ethnographic tradition of participant observation that makes the viewpoint of the researched central to the endeavour (Smith 1987, McLeod and Thomson 2009). Yet our focus on the mobile project of mothering also has clear affinities with the work shadowing tradition that forms part of organisational studies and training where individuals are followed over an extended period of time as they move between settings, and are invited to provide a running commentary on their activities that is recorded in note form by the researcher 'shadow'. (MacDonald 2005). Our refusal to focus our gaze exclusively on the child distinguishes our approach from both infant observation (Urwin 2007) and child development traditions (Gillen et al. 2007) as does our willingness to engage in free conversation with participants and to go beyond description in our reflective field notes. We have no interest in fabricating a clinical setting nor in importing concepts forged therein (Frosh and Baraitser 2008, Frosh 2008). Rather we access the 'psychic reality' of the research situation through an attentiveness to our own responses. We have written elsewhere (Thomson 2010, Hadfield 2010) about how each member of the research team is located in relationship to motherhood, and how this relationship is an active dimension of how she experiences and relates the mothers in the study and how the mothers relate to her. We have drawn on a tradition of reflexive feminist and psycho-social research that values the subjectivity of the researcher as a source of data in its own right (Walkerdine et al. 2001). By recording the emotional dynamics of fieldwork and subjecting these data to group analysis within the research team we aim to capture some of the relational and affective dimensions



of mothering, akin perhaps to the practice development aims of work shadowing that explicitly seek ‘illumination for both parties’. As part of an ongoing series of research interactions within a longitudinal study, based on continuity in the relationship between researcher and researched, we understand the ‘day in a life’ method as a way of enriching existing understanding through a developing relationship.

It is only on reflection that we have explored how our ‘day in a life’ approach might sit within a sociological literature on researching children’s lives. Our combination of visual, observational and mobile methods, as well as the active negotiation of the focus of the research are characteristic of research approaches with young children, although most of this research focuses on children over 3 (Willow 2004, Clark and Moss 2001, Clark 2005, Murray 2009). Yet our focus on the dynamic relationship between different people and settings (including mother and child) is unlikely to sit easily alongside the privileging of children’s perspective championed in this literature. One criticism of ethnographic methods with young children for example, has been that they tend to foreground adult constructions through the interpretive medium of the researcher (Stamatoglu 1994, Emond 2005). However our experience of trying to focus on the mother suggests how effective children are at interrupting the researcher’s gaze and engaging researchers directly. Inevitably our approach captures something of the dynamic that exist between the researcher, the child and the mother and as such we believe that it is an effective method for capturing the changing experience of mothering, with the ‘open ended existential matrix that is the child’ (Baraitser 2007).

**Acting up - entering the field and negotiating the gaze**

***7.40am***

I arrive at Tina's house. Tina greets me. Saffron is standing behind Tina in the kitchen doorway. I have not met Saffron before; she is now two and dressed in a floral summer dress, fawn brown combat pants and sandals. Tina introduces me to Saffron and tells her that I will be spending the day with them and I say hello. Saffron hides behind Tina and clings to her leg. We go into the dining room. Tina offers me a drink and I say only if she is making herself one. She makes me a tea. Saffron is nervous around me. She calls for her mum and clings to her arm. Tina puts Saffron in her highchair. Saffron looks round anxiously for her mother. I notice that Tina has put out the medical record on the table. I ask Saffron if we should take a photograph and show her the camera. Saffron looks curiously at the camera. I show her the picture of the book.

***On arrival***

When Monica opened the door I was met by 2 and a half year old Lucien's direct eye contact. He was wearing a red Thomas top and jeans, with a mullet-type kiddie haircut, big blue eyes. I was welcomed in and I folded my bike stowing it in the hall next to the buggy. I was immediately ushered into the front room to see Lucien's train set. A DVD of Thomas was on the TV ready to play and he was deep into an elaborate train world laid out on the floor, with bridges, sidings, a coal dept, tunnels and much more.

[..]

Lucien immediately invited me into his play, narrating his trains. He told me that the bridge had 'collapsed' and I remarked in what a good word that was. While I played

with Lucien Monica was on her mobile to a friend and it transpired that she was setting up a visit to a drop-in group. I briefly explained what I wanted from the day – to come along with her, to see how it goes, to take pictures as we went along as aide memoires to help me write up notes later. Monica seemed comfortable with the plan and I got my camera out to show Lucien and together we took a picture of his train set.

These two extracts, taken from the first part of the field notes, show how central the children were to our observations from the moment of our arrival at the mothers' homes, and the extent to which we as researchers engaged with them and negotiated the research task with them. The concept of an 'observation' was difficult for us to clearly communicate to the mothers, let alone the children, and the practical task of documenting activities through photographs provided a medium for representing the observations that was both explicit and negotiable. In both these example, the researchers use the camera a way of establishing a relationship with the child and of co-opting them into the research endeavor. Although we have maintained contact with our research mothers from late pregnancy, we are not sufficiently 'known' within the family to be familiar to the child – and at this stage have to introduce ourselves or be introduced by the mother. Moreover, our existing research relationship is with the mother, and we are drawn into continuing conversations that reach back to her pre-maternal past. The following extract, taken from Lucy Hadfield's observation with the Wagland family shows how the exclusive relationship between the researcher and the mother could be a problem for the child. Tina asks the researcher about the house that she has bought since they last saw each other. They begin an intimate

conversation about their property plans, reflecting on the dependencies with parents that this involves.

Throughout this conversation Saffron is desperately trying to get Tina's attention, tugging at her leg and saying 'Mummy' at an increasingly high volume. I am aware of this but continue to look at Tina. Eventually Tina picks up Saffron whilst continuing to talk to me. Saffron points a finger at me and says, 'who are you?' Tina continues to talk but Saffron is looking straight at me. As soon as there is a lull in the conversation I turn to Saffron and say, 'I am Lucy, we are spending the day together'. Tina seems to reluctantly come back to focus and says, 'yes this is Lucy she is spending the day with us, we better make a move'.

In another observation with the Thompson family, Mary Jane Kehily accompanies teenage mother Kim to the nursery to collect two year old Tempest. On their way home via the shop Mary Jane is confronted by Tempest, who also questions her presence.

We stop at Tesco. The shop is quite full. The children run up and down along the aisles, taking things off the shelves and then taking the shelves off the brackets. Kim tells Tempest to stop being a vandal, 'I'll kick your bum if you don't stop that now'. The children choose a drink and we wait in the queue. A man comes up to Kim and they exchange a few words. Their shoulders move closer together as they talk. He asks her to get a couple of things for him, passing her the items and the money. She tells me later that he is Dave, she went out with him for a while when Tempest was one and they are still good friends. He has two 'really nice' children already with a previous partner and another

one on the way with a new partner. Tempest points at me and says, 'Not coming'. Kim says, 'Sometimes you just say whatever you think don't you?'

These are the only two examples where children directly challenged the presence of the researcher. Yet there was always a dynamic at play between the researcher, the mother and the child. In the following example Sue Sharpe documents her bemusement at the dynamics that arises between herself, two year old Gabriel and his lesbian mother Nadia.

We got stuff together to go out, and climbed the stairs again. Gabriel pushed something off the shelf onto the floor, and Nadia didn't scold him but made a comment to him, and I picked it up and put it back. Then when she was about to put his shoes on, she noticed he had odd socks on – they were very similar, stripy with a bird or animal on, but odd and this clearly would not do. She told him: "that must have been Ima" (i.e. the name Gabriel calls his non-biological parent) and went upstairs to get a matching pair. Gabriel was very friendly to me, and started calling me 'Mama', which is what he calls his grandmother, and Nadia observes that I look a bit like her mother and this must be why he is calling me this. I assumed (and hoped) that he did not really think that I was his grandma, but it certainly made for an easy and jolly interaction between us, although I still can't quite get my head around being mistaken for a granny (and it had also happened in the last ethnography, with an adult friend, so it could be correct). His calling me Mama continues on and off throughout the day, although he sometimes calls me Sue as well, and I also thought sometimes he was saying 'Sue' when he was actually saying 'shoe'.

### **Feeding and eating 'events'**

'Feeding' is a central element of the enactment of good mothering (Murcott 1982, De Vault 1991, Allison 1996, Murphy 2005, Cook 2009, Fox et al. 2009) codified in expert guidance to mothers from the desirability of breastfeeding in the first year of life, through the directive to consume 5 items of fruit and vegetables a day and to send children to school with suitable lunchboxes. What counts as good mothering is dynamic and disciplinary, with infant feeding practices provide a highly visible arena within which different 'tribes' of mothers constitute and distinguish themselves (Head 2010). 'Eating' is also an arena in which children can exercise agency, express independent desires and preferences and negotiate relationships with maternal dependence (Mayall 1996). Deborah Lupton uses memory work to explore the extent to which childhood memories around such 'feeding events' are entangled with our very sense of self as well as expressing family and class cultures (Lupton 2008). From a psychoanalytic perspective childhood interactions around food are symbolic of survival and infused with creative and destructive feelings which resonate throughout life (Orbach 2002, Chernin 1985). In some, but not all of the observations, negotiations around food and eating provided the stage for heightened dynamics between researcher, child and mother. Here Lucy Hadfield describes such a moment, which also demonstrates how the researcher becomes complicit in the interaction through the use of the camera.

Tina puts down the bowl of cornflakes on the table and Saffron's beaker. Saffron refuses to eat her cornflakes. Tina tells Saffron that if she doesn't eat her cornflakes then she will be hungry. Tina turns her attention to me, she asks me about the hotel I stayed in the night before. [...]Saffron looks at me curiously. Tina encourages Saffron to eat some cornflakes. Saffron plays with her spoon, makes faces and looks up at the ceiling. Tina says to Saffron,

show Lucy that you can eat all your cornflakes up. I tell Saffron that if she eats up all her cornflakes we could take a picture of the bowl and her spoon. Saffron eats her cornflakes and looks at me whilst she is eating. Tina disappears into the kitchen. She is ironing her top for the day. Saffron finishes her cornflakes and we take a picture. Saffron is interested in what the bowl looks like on the camera so I show her.

Once Saffron has finished the cereal Tina brings in a bowl of melon pieces. She says to Saffron, I know you don't like melon, and to me, she won't like this. Tina leaves the room. I say to Saffron shall we take a picture of the melon? We take a picture and Saffron wolfs down the melon, towards the ends she crams in as many as 3 pieces of melon in her mouth.

**Insert image: caption 'melon'**

In this example it is clear that Tina is actively using the presence of an audience as a way of negotiating the social performance of feeding/eating. Tina has existing narratives as to what Saffron will do, and she engages Lucy as an accomplice in the project of feeding. Lucy again uses the camera as a way of forming an alliance with Saffron, and by photographing the empty bowl and the suspect melon the status of the food appears to change. Saffron eats the melon with gusto and there is a sense that she and Lucy have somehow outmaneuvered Tina. The ultimate objective, of Saffron 'eating well', has been understood and achieved. Yet Saffron has also succeeded in overcoming her exclusion from the adult conversation. Although this episode takes place in the privacy of Tina's home, Lucy's presence makes it a public performance, and Tina is able to use the extraordinary circumstances to renegotiate

what might be habitual patterns of relating between herself and Saffron. Yet it may also be that Lucy and Tina have fallen into a way of relating that is typical in itself, adults conspiring in order to create time for chat while also ensuring that the ‘mothering’ is done.

### ***The park and café 1.30***

I offer to buy lunch and Monica chooses a strawberry cornetto for Lucien, a humus sandwich for herself. I get a haloumi and tomato panini. She orders fresh orange juice and organic apple juice. I suggest that Lucien might like pasta pesto – always a favourite for my son and many of his friends. Monica says that he would not like it, in fact he is ‘awful with food’. She then tells me that this will be his first ice cream, a milestone, and I feel like I have done a terrible thing in corrupting him [offering to buy him an ice cream earlier in the day]. But Monica is easy going. I pay and we go outside to find a table on the grass. [..] The food arrives and Monica tries the ice cream out on Lucien, spooning it to him rather than giving it to him to hold. He does not like it. I am amazed, and feel slightly better in that I may not have corrupted him. But it soon transpires that he *is* ‘difficult around food’. She tells me how they have struggled with feeding him. The only thing he eats is toast and cake. Monica says that he is ‘not bothered’ about food. I vaguely recall seeing them feeding him toast in his high chair the last time I was there. This is clearly a tense point in their parenting, and there is lots of history. Monica goes and buys him a croissant and he comes over to me and looks at my food. On return he says that he wants some of my sandwich, which Monica says ‘makes her a liar’. I am definitely drawn into a three way dynamic here. Now Lucien wants me to feed it to him, which I am resistant to do. This is feeling tricky and I go to the toilet in order to give Monica some space to work something out. While



sitting at the table alone with Lucien other mothers smile at me, and I feel drawn into making friends.

Like Saffron, Lucien actively uses the presence of an engaged audience, to complicate the habitual performance of eating/ feeding, and to create new meanings and possibilities. In these food-related episodes (but also in others) we witness performances of the family, and evidence of the way that particular mothering and childhood practices, such as feeding/eating, are dynamic sites of social relating. By observing these practices, and noting our emotional responses and the focus of our gaze with what we know from our own experience and/or normative ideals of mothering within the popular culture. On one hand this is an artefact of the method, observation itself has an impact on the phenomena observed. Yet eating and feeding are practices frequently observed by other: family members, strangers in café's, other mothers. Where the earlier examples capture something of the child (and mother) reacting to the presence of the researcher and her camera, these examples suggest how all parties (including the researcher) begin to *act-out*, providing insight into the particular family dynamics, but also into the local culture of mothering within which the behaviour takes places, and the ways that this interacts with the researcher's own position vis a vis mothering. We may feel that Rachel is giving too much of herself in this observation, that she is imposing herself on the situation. But we also need to consider whether and how she may be actively invited to participate in a family dynamic. The following extract finds them still in the café in the park:

Lucien is now resorting to high pitched screaming, it is hard for him when we are talking.

Monica is calm and does not seem to react to the screaming. She takes a phone call and I

take Lucien for a walk outside of the gated area into the open park land. We pretend to fly. We return, walking through a knot of children at the gate and Lucien clings to my leg. Monica waves and Lucien is reassured to see her. [...] Lucien stays close to me at the table, and enjoys tactile games. Monica says to me about Lucien, ‘he’s flirty isn’t he?’ and I say ‘yes’. She talks about how he likes to get his grandmas around his finger. Earlier she had said that it was hard to leave him to go to work, and that they had experienced a difficult period when he seemed to prefer his daddy. But it has been resolved because Lucien is now a Mummy’s boy which makes things easier. I am not sure what is going on. A toy bus is given to Lucien to distract him and we continue to talk, and Monica tries to get him to eat. She had to eat his ice cream and so did not have the appetite for his sandwich. I am still hungry as he had half my sandwich but has left it. I wonder if it would be gross to eat it after he has played with it. I would with my own son. It feels like we have been at the table too long now. Lucien is getting difficult and I am feeling a bit done in. I think that I suggest that we move on

**Insert image: caption ‘Uneaten Food’.**

The final food-related example offered here, taken from Sue Sharpe’s observation of the Woolfe family, reveals a rather different dynamic, in which the researcher is not explicitly drawn in by the child or the mother, but where her emotional responses nevertheless provide insight into the situation.

We all sat back at the table for lunch. Gabriel was in his high chair with a bib top on. Gabriel had the same as us for lunch – a little gluten free soup (originally bought for the

child carer apparently), bread, cheese, and some tomato and cucumber cut into pieces. Gabriel ate very efficiently, spearing pieces of bread, and cheese with a small fork. He ate everything on his plate, and asked for some of the (homemade) chutney, which he clearly enjoyed and wanted more, so in the end Nadia had to put it away. She said he seemed to like vinegar based things, and also ate olives! Over lunch we also talked about her expectations for the birth. [...] At the end of lunch Gabriel started to get a bit fractious again, throwing his drink bottle around and Nadia said he was tired. She then cleared up and washed up with the directive to Gabriel, 'you show Sue the horse and stable' (the horse and stable were 2 parts of this jigsaw piece that he had to slot together, and there were many others that we did, pictured on the floor in one of the photos). I also took this as a directive to me to go and play with Gabriel, which I did. After a short while he was getting rather hyper, running around and falling over and spinning round and round, which Nadia commented he did when he was tired. After one fall he came over to me on the sofa to have his arm kissed better which Nadia was rather amused about. Then he had his pre-sleep bottle of milk on the settee next to me, and when he'd finished Nadia took him up to bed. I took a few pictures of the lounge and the birthday card while she was doing this.

Sue is not invited into the performance of eating/ feeding in the way that Lucy and Rachel had been during their observations. What she observes is a highly competent and contained performance of family, which makes her feel somewhat marginal. Nadia names Gabriels' emotional states 'tired' and her interpretation is not explicitly challenged by either the researcher or Gabriel. His approach to the researcher for a kiss is approved of by Nadia, who remains clearly in control.

## **Acting out family narratives**

Following families over an extended period of time, from the perspective of different family members, provides us with extraordinary insights into the complexity of family life and the ways in which family narratives or ‘scripts’ are created, re-created, inhabited and challenged. We have taken inspiration here from the Life History tradition of authors such as Paul Thompson who draws on the family systems approach of John Byng-Hall in order to conceptualizes the family in terms of a continuous contractual relationship across time, where unresolved emotional dynamics can be transmitted through the ‘symbolic coinage’ of family stories, within which motifs, patterns and difficulties are repeated and the ‘very phrases echo down the generations’ (Thompson 1993: 30). A more sociological variant of this approach can be found in the work of Thompson’s intellectual collaborator Daniel Bertaux who draws on the Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the ‘habitus’, through which a ‘condensation of experiences’ takes place within families over the course of generations. Both Bertaux and Thompson emphasize the dynamism and ‘openness’ of transmission, where an ‘offer only becomes a transmission when it is received’ and the ‘form of what is passed down can be transformed in the transmission’ (Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame 2003: 47). Individuals may choose both to accept and reject their transgenerational inheritance (Thompson 1993: 15), and families may be more or less successful in ‘calling back’ children into family traditions (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 2003).

Interviews provide us with a sense of how family scripts evolve over time, and it becomes possible to see daughters coming to terms with their mothers through the experience of

becoming parents, accepting cultural inheritances that they may have previously resisted, and seeking to recreate aspects of their own parenting with their own children (Thomson 2008). Children are drawn into these scripts from the earliest stages. During pregnancy we are told of hopes and fears for the child, after birth there are a proliferation of narratives about *resemblances* between the child and existing or deceased relatives, and between the embodied parenting practices of different generations (see also Mason 2008). The day in a life methodology allows us to capture something of the family habitus, the practices through which the values and identifications of the family are enacted, reproduced and re-made in changing circumstances. Here we see the child as an active agent of family scripts, whose behaviour is narrated in a particular way, and who in turn responds to the expectations and invitations of those around them.

It is impossible within the space available here to provide a convincing account of the way in which any of the children featured here (Saffron, Lucien, Tempest and Gabriel) fit with the broader family scripts that have emerged in family case histories incorporating a wide range of data gathered from different family members over time. Moreover, we are only beginning to grasp how Saffron inhabits the character of cheekiness that appears to be her legacy, or Gabriel the role of the sensitive/ caring child that we have discerned emerging around him. Tempest is certainly realising the volatile essence of her name, condensing as it does a tradition of family turmoil. The data shared in this paper suggests that Lucien's 'flirtatiousness' performs a function for the whole family and provides clues to the wider family narrative that values shared parenting. As we return to our families for a further round of data collection and meet the children again, we are beginning to see how they take up their role within the wider family, and how meaning is made through and by them. We

also become more familiar to the children, recognised and remembered and must negotiate with them a more formal role in documenting their family's story.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have explored data emerging from a qualitative longitudinal study of the transition to motherhood, foregrounding 'a day in the life' participant observation techniques that have enabled us to capture the emergence of the child within the family dynamic. The paper draws on data across the case studies, focusing on examples of interaction between researcher, mother and child relating to food. We have explored how researcher subjectivity can be interrogated as rich source of evidence regarding the place of the child within the research and family dynamic. We have also observed the way in which researcher attention moves between direct and indirect engagement with the child, and between adult and child centred activities, giving rise to reactions ('acting up') from both mothers and children. Our data reveals significant differences between family practices, with children performing identities and roles for and with the researcher that are intimately bound up with wider family narratives. Within the day in a life data it is possible to discern different directions within the research gaze: *direct data* that captures the child interacting with researcher; *indirect data* where it is evident that the researcher's presence is having impact on the dynamics between mother and child and *reflective data*, where the interaction provokes reflection/feelings on the part of the researcher. The data is also characterized by dynamics of *inclusion/ exclusion* in terms of conversation (who is talking to who, and who is being excluded) and play (as a medium for both engaging with and escaping the child). A sense of *fluidity around authority* also infuses that data, enacted by children, commented on by mothers

and captured in researchers' reflections. In research terms the interaction captures considerable fluidity and to whose desires and needs are articulated and recognized - who decides.

It is possible to locate our use of the day in a life approach within a wider methodological landscape, fitting both with work shadowing traditions within organizational studies and ethnographic traditions of participant observation. Our data demonstrates the significance of the relationship between the mother and the researcher in shaping how the research encounter is understood and the extent to which the child is offered to the researcher for play and interaction, and the extent to which the mother occupies the space of the research relationship for herself. The relationship is shaped by a range of factors including age, mothering status, social class and culture, but it is also actively shaped by the child and the researcher who make claims on each other. Within the context of a longitudinal study that employs a range of methods, the use of observation provides new perspective on the family from the position of the youngest member, and so enriches the emerging account of the family enormously. Continuity of researcher over time also means that this observational data can consolidate a range of insights that have been developing and an attentiveness to latent as well as manifest meaning can reveal family dynamics and the research process in action.

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### **Author biographies**

**Rachel Thomson** is Professor of Social Research in the Faculty of Health and Social Care at the Open University. Her research interests focus on the intersection of biographical and social change, including transitions to adulthood and parenthood. Recent publications include *Researching Social Change: Qualitative Perspectives* (Sage 2009 with McLeod) and *Unfolding Lives: Youth, Gender and Change* (Policy Press 2009). Address: Faculty of Health and Social Care, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK 7 6AA, email: [r.thomson@open.ac.uk](mailto:r.thomson@open.ac.uk)

**Lucy Hadfield** worked as a researcher on the MoMM project from 2005- 2009 and is currently a full time PhD candidate in the Faculty of Health and Social Care at the Open University. She has expertise in research and consultation with young people and has

published in the areas of motherhood and children's lives and relationships. Previous publications include (with Edwards et al, 2006) *Sibling Identity and Relationships: Sisters and Brothers*, London: Routledge. Address: Faculty of Health and Social Care, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK 7 6AA, email: l.s.hadfield@open.ac.uk

**Mary Jane Kehily** is Senior Lecturer in Childhood and Youth Studies at The Open University, UK. She has a background in cultural studies and education and research interests in gender and sexuality, narrative and identity and popular culture. She has written widely on these themes and is author of *Sexuality, Gender and Schooling, shifting agendas in social learning*, (Routledge: 2002) and co-author, with Anoop Nayak of *Gender, Youth and Culture, young masculinities and femininities* (Palgrave: 2008). Address: Faculty of Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK 7 6AA, email: m.j.kehily@open.ac.uk

**Sue Sharpe** is a freelance social researcher whose main interests have been young people, motherhood and family relationships and she has researched and written books on these areas. Recent publications include *Inventing Adulthoods: A biographical approach to youth transitions* (Sage 2007, with Henderson, McGrellis, Thomson and Holland). As well as working on the Making of Modern Motherhoods/Dynamics of Motherhood project at the Open University, she has been involved for many years in the Making the Long View: Inventing Adulthoods project within the Timescapes Programme, following the lives of a sample of young people in the UK, based at London South Bank University where she is also a Visiting Fellow.

Address: Weeks Centre for Social Policy and Research, London South Bank University,  
London SE1 OAA.

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