Researching family relationships: a qualitative mixed methods approach

Abstract

Research has demonstrated how families are constituted through everyday practices of care and emotional investment. In this article I suggest that a qualitative mixed methods approach can add another dimension to sociological understandings of these processes. The integration of different qualitative methods produces a dynamic account of everyday family relationships and experiences of intimacy. It shows how the biographical, experiential and social are interwoven, enabling the fabric of family relationships to be unpicked. Drawing on original data from empirical research, I outline the kinds of material produced by different methods and the usefulness of creativity in research design, including innovative methods such as the emotion map and psychosocial approaches to research. Through case study analysis, I demonstrate how the mixing of methods generates multilayered, richly textured information on family relationships but I caution against tidying up all the empirical loose ends. I suggest that there is analytical benefit in retaining some of the 'messiness' that comprises connected lives.

Key words/phrases: qualitative mixed methods, families, intimacy, emotion maps, psychosocial interviews

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Introduction

There is a significant body of research that has effectively examined everyday family practices and the patterning of kin formation in families but analysis of parent–child and adult/parent couple relationships remains somewhat opaque. I want to suggest that a qualitative mixed methods approach can begin to piece together understandings of these relational processes. Drawing on original data from empirical research, I demonstrate how a qualitative mixed methods approach can generate multidimensional material on *where, when* and *how* family relationships are experienced and *why* interactions take on particular forms, values and understandings. The integration of these data produces a dynamic account of families' sensual, emotional and embodied interactions – extending understanding of how parents, parents and children, and siblings ordinarily relate to one another. In analysing these interconnected and complex data I suggest however that it is pertinent to retain the emotional messiness, uncertainties and fluidity which constitute relational experience, because by leaving in methodological and experiential loose ends we retain the vitality of lived lives.

In the first section of this article I introduce the qualitative methods that I have used to study family relationships, most recently in the *Behind Closed Doors* project.[1] I illustrate the benefits of creativity in research design, notably psychosocial approaches and innovative methods such as the emotion map. I focus on one individual, Brian, to illustrate the value of a qualitative mixed

methods approach. Brian is a white middle aged heterosexual father who lives in a rural village. He is married and has two teenage sons; both parents are working and the family enjoy a comfortable lifestyle. I selected Brian as a case study for this article because he completed all of the methods on offer and so represents a useful methodological example.

Brian's account effectively illustrate how facets of lived experience and understanding combine in different ways at different times, producing *momentary* meanings. In my analysis of these data I resist the temptation to tie up empirical loose ends, producing an overly determining character portrait through the narrativization of experience. Instead I demonstrate how threads of data may be integrated in order to retain the methodological and conceptual 'messiness' which characterises qualitative mixed methods research on personal relationships. I argue that it is possible and preferable to analyse the *patterning* of experience within cases and across the dataset in ways that accommodate the temporality of family connections.

Behind Closed Doors: a qualitative mixed methods study

The *Behind Closed Doors* project aimed to explore experiences and understandings of intimacy and sexuality in families and to interrogate the efficacy of a qualitative mixed methods approach in studying personal relationships and family living. In this project I used a combination of different qualitative methods: diaries, emotion maps, observation, interviews, vignettes, photographs, and focus/group interviews. Data were collected from parents

and children living in the North of England, comprising 10 families in total (9 mothers, 5 fathers and 10 children).

The terminology used in this research has required especially careful handling, differentiating areas of relational experience – notably intimacy, sex and sexuality – that might be otherwise connected in particular contexts. In my analysis I use the terms 'family intimacy' and 'family sexuality' to acknowledge the breadth of meanings that are pulled together under the rubric of intimacy and sexuality while simultaneously separating these from the inference of sex. Not surprisingly, there was slippage in how parents and children expressed intimacy and sexuality and at points their meanings blurred; at other times however distinctions were upheld to separate different kinds of relationships and emotional interaction, something that is demonstrated in data presented later on. Throughout the article I draw on Lynn Jamieson's understandings of intimacy in family relationships (Jamieson, 1998; 1999), framing intimacy as practices of 'close association, familiarity and privileged knowledge'; positive 'emotional attachments' which involve 'a very particular form of "closeness"... associated with high levels of trust' (ibid, 2005: 189).

The sensitive nature of the topic, investigating people's private lives, meant that particular attention was also afforded to ethical processes and protocols.[2] Participants could withdraw from the study at any point and everyone was offered printed transcripts of their data and the opportunity to delete sections if they wished to do so. No one took up this option. There were occasions when participants did make significant disclosures and these were always handled

with great sensitivity in the interview, in follow up meetings and in my analysis. The insights into family and parenting practice that individuals gained through participation were however always positively received. Several parents stated that they intended to use what they had 'learnt' about themselves and/or patterns of behaviour in their families to redress issues raised and any perceived personal shortcomings.

Participation required considered commitment both from the families and the researchers. Two researchers collected data, working consecutively over the duration of the project. Once initial contact had been established fieldwork with families spread over a 6-12 week period. Given the personal and practical investment this required it is perhaps surprising that no one dropped out of the project once they had signed up to participate. In fact participation rates markedly increased once research began. This was a testament to participants' genuine desire to increase their knowledge and understanding of family processes. It demonstrated that research in this area can have real benefits for participants, something that I had always believed but which remains typically hard to see in more time-limited fieldwork. There was no prescribed number of methods that each individual or family should complete but researchers obviously did try and encourage full participation wherever possible. In the end household completion rates ranged from 19%-88%. On average, this comprised 4 methods per person: 6 methods per mother; 3 methods per father; 3 methods per child. For a breakdown of methods and participation rates see appendix 1.

The *Behind Closed Doors* project demonstrated that a qualitative mixed methods approach can extend understanding on the interiority of affective experience, everyday practices of family intimacy and the affect of external socio-cultural factors on 'private' life. In the next section of this article I introduce the methods that were used in the project and the different kinds of data these produced. This description aims to familiarise the reader with particular methods and/or approaches and to methodologically contextualise my subsequent case study analysis. In presenting these methods I do not suggest that they are the only and/or best ones ways for studying personal lives. I chose methods because I believed they were fit for purpose but this selection process was undoubtedly influenced by personal preference and familiarity. I am certain that other researchers would bring different ones to the mix. While I introduce all the methods that were used I pay particular attention to novel approaches and/or methods that are not traditionally included within sociologically-informed studies of family lives.

- **Visual methods**

Graphic methods and visual techniques have been used to good effect in the study of families, childhood, extended kin relationships and networks of intimacy (for on overview see Gabb, 2008). In my research I was interested in the processes of family relationships, analysis that tackles the abstract realm of our emotions, feelings and connections with others. To generate data on these deeply personal, often highly sensitive themes I pioneered a visual technique called the emotion map, which charted the patterning of affective behaviour around the home (see figure 1). In principle the emotion map

method is similar to a household sticker chart. It was developed from the household portrait technique introduced by Andrea Doucet (2001) in her study of gendered roles and responsibilities among heterosexual couples.
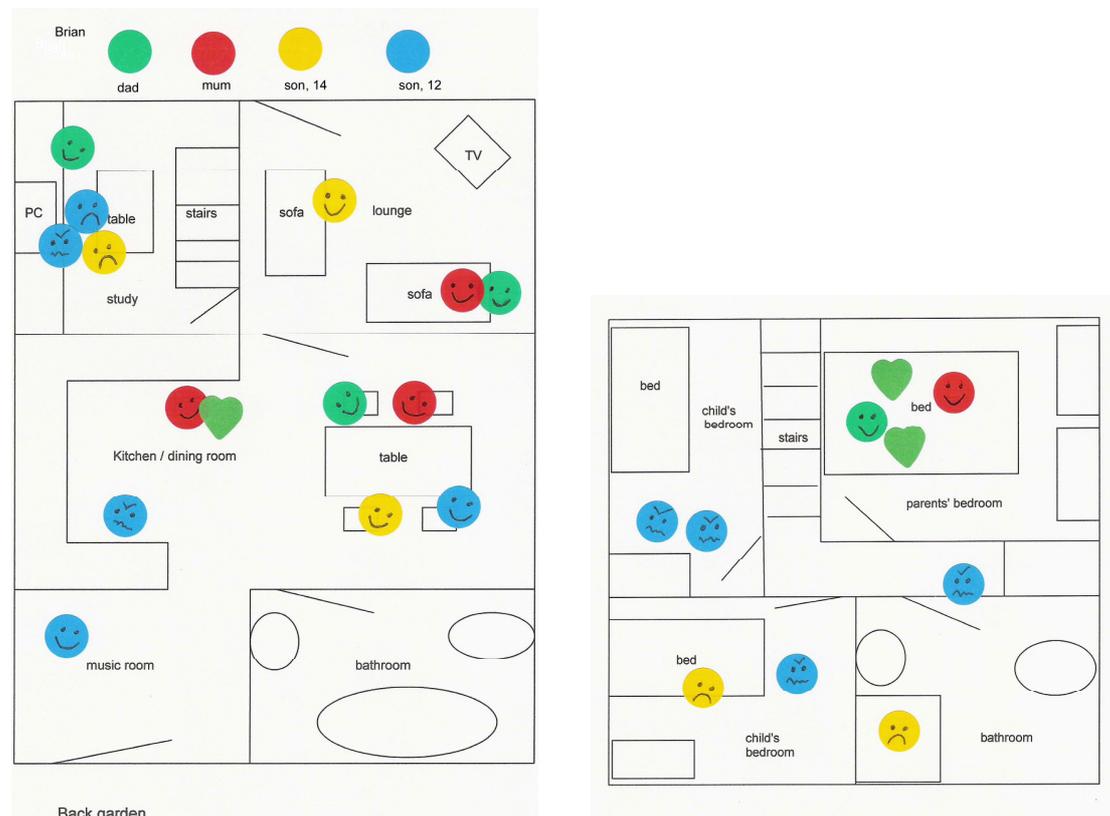

Figure 1: Brian's emotion map

The researcher was taken on a guided tour of the family home and either she or a family member would sketch out a floor plan. The sketch was then reproduced using *Microsoft Draw* and an A3 size copy was given out to each participant several days later along with a set of coloured emoticon stickers, denoting happiness, sadness, anger, and love/affection. Family members (broadly defined) were individually assigned a colour. Participants then placed different stickers on their household floor plan to indicate where an interaction had occurred and between whom – to spatially locate relational encounters.

Emotion maps were completed by individuals over a one week period and aimed to gather information on the patterning of affective behaviour around the home. These graphic materials were analysed as data and were expanded upon in a follow up interview. These interviews enabled participants to clarify the sketchy meanings of events characterised in their emotion maps and to elaborate on the scenarios presented. For example Brian provided the story behind the intimate embrace depicted on his emotion map in the kitchen/dining room, recalling sad news that was received. In interview his description not only added contextual information on the scenario it also provided insight into his perception of gendered roles. He saw it as *his* (male) responsibility to provide emotional and embodied support his (female) partner, even though they were equally affected by the news.

One of the key benefits of the emotion map method is that it requires neither literacy nor 'artistic' skills and can be comparably completed by adults and children. Younger children found this method particularly empowering and used it to have their say both in the research and within their own families. For example in another family, after a sibling argument one young girl pronounced 'that's it!' and ran upstairs to stick a 'grumpy' sticker on her emotion map. A few days later in family discussions of these research materials she was able to get her sense of injustice raised onto the family agenda.

- **Research diaries**

Completed alongside emotion maps, diaries provided temporal information on family interactions and how people conceptually and literarily framed these encounters. Diaries aimed to generate information on families' everyday routines and 'affective currencies' (Gabb, 2008: 141). A note book was given to all participants along with their copy of the household floor plan. The brief given to participants about what to include in their diaries was left quite open, but it was suggested that they write about interactions and/or emotional experiences which occurred over a one week period. In this way emotion maps and diaries were designed to generate written and visual data over the same period of time and in many cases addressed many of the same interactions and/or surrounding events. Diaries could be completed immediately after an event or at the end of the day, recalling events that were remembered as significant. As with emotion maps, diary data were supplemented and extended through a follow up interview.

Brian was one of the few participants to explicitly mention sex and in his diary he was disarmingly open about both his fondness for his partner and his sexual desire, adding detail to the intimate exchanges that were denoted on his emotion map.

> Brian (diary): I started feeling horny... I tried it on. No joy, once [partner] has made her mind up that's it – dog came in then and unfortunately ruined anything that might have happened... [Partner] suggested the bath together which I really love

> We had a brief cuddle this morning ([partner] on my shoulder which I love) and then I came into the room when she was putting her sexy tights on (not!) so I helped her (or hindered her!).

Brian's account shows how family sexuality is necessarily managed; sex is something that has to be fitted around other family responsibilities and mediated through the absence/presence of children and even the pet dog. He begins his diary, the initial research encounter, saying that he 'woke up wanting a bonk [sex]', feelings that are repeated in several subsequent entries. In follow up interview he acknowledged that this initial diary entry was designed to shock as much as it reflected his actual feelings. Here and elsewhere he appeared to use forthright language to buffer sentiments that render him vulnerable, a defensive strategy that I explore in more detail later on.

Across diary data participants' choice of vocabulary and use of symbolic phrases were most enlightening. In some families phrases such as 'kisses & cuddles' and 'hugs and kisses' were commonplace; in others 'I love you' was used to hold together fragile and/or remote kin-ties. Affective shorthand condensed time-consuming emotion work, standing in for more complex emotions and/or ambivalent feelings. It has been argued that it is the availability of time which delimits our emotional capacity rather than differences in public–private feeling (Jamieson, 2005). Diary data illustrated some of the discursive strategies that families have developed to manage the

precious commodity of 'family time'; the cultural–discursive framing of emotional temporality and the materialisation of time-limited family intimacy.

- **Observations**

Observation data visualised otherwise disembodied interviews and gave a glimpse of everyday affective practices. They showed which *performances of family* participants chose to render public, illustrating when they thought they were at their most typical and/or 'best' as family. These data on the texture of intimate family life and the mediation of lived experience often provided significant insight into everyday family processes and the ways that individuals interacted with one another, especially parents and children.

The observation method was however the least popular one with families. Reasons given for non-participation sometimes included the time commitment required, underlying this, and sometimes explicitly stated, was a sense of unease at being watched – under surveillance. In the first instance and to make the method more appealing, families were encouraged to play with the video camera. Observations were described as being more akin to home movie making than CCTV (closed circuit television), sharing similarities with familiar fly-on-the-wall and/or reality television. These descriptions and strategies aimed to make the method more appealing without misleading families over the inconvenience, practicalities and ethical issues of participant observation. Not surprisingly research ethics remained a major concern for many parents, namely what is it legitimate to observe when researching family relationships?

Where there was interest, researchers made suggestions of the kinds of activities which might be recorded, notably meal times, a day trip and bedtime routines (for younger children). The final decision however about which activities would be observed was left up to parents, similarly so the media used to 'record' these data. Leaving this decision with parents aimed to reinforce the point that observations involve the co-production of data, being equally produced by the research team and the families involved. Some participants selected video camera recording produced by the families (auto-observation) or the researcher, while others opted for audio recordings and/or field notes. Assurances were given to all participating families about future uses and the analytical purpose of observation data. After observations, copies of all materials were given to participating families and they were asked if they wanted to delete any sections: all declined this offer. Observations were then logged using detailed description of the activities and interactions and where appropriate audio material was transcribed. These textual materials comprise part of the overall dataset while original audio-visual copies of observations remain securely stored, apart from the project data archive.

Notwithstanding the significant ethical challenges raised by video observations, the glimpse of everyday family processes generated through this medium was hard to emulate through other methods. The data often brought to the surface differences between lived experience and descriptions of family practice and/or stated ways of being. For example Brian presented

his family as open-minded about sex and sexuality at home and explained that he had 'no issues' around intra-familial displays of nudity (contained within set codes of decency and propriety). In observations however the researcher noted that his explicitness was perceived by others as a source of embarrassment, something that was also raised in the family group interview. How the family managed issues of nudity and privacy was a matter of underlying contention but Brian appeared to be somewhat impervious to others' degrees of discomfort. Though observations appeared to 'capture' everyday practices, these audio/visual materials were not seen as more less authentic than any other data, they simply added another piece to the family jigsaw. Dissonance between data from different methods and different perspectives provided depth to the emergent portraits.

- **Interviews**

While creativity in research design is fruitful, interviews remain emblematic of qualitative research, affording participants the opportunity to talk more or less expansively about their lives. There are a range of associated interview techniques which in turn produce different sorts of biographical subjects and accounts (Harding, 2006). In the *Behind Closed Doors* project I used a biographical narrative (BN) psychosocial approach, drawing on interview methods that generate lifecourse data and which have proven to be effective in the study of parenthood, families and relationships (Hollway, 2005; Roseneil, 2006; Thomson, Kehily, Hadfield, & Sharpe, 2008). The biographical narrative integrative method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2001) and free association narrative interview (FANI) (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) are

designed 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 both conform to the *Gestalt* principle suggesting that through the framing and telling of stories the speaker produces a *biographical narrative* (Wengraf, 2001: 113) that reveals the *significance* of experiences and/or events. In this respect the techniques are notably similar, where they diverge is in the analytical stages with BNIM adopting a more sociologically-informed approach and FANI drawing on psychoanalytical interpretation. Ethical concerns have been raised about psychosocial approaches (see Gabb, forthcoming) and the potential for 'over interpretation' of data in psychoanalytical readings (for critical debate in this area see Layton, 2008). I leave such concerns to one side in this article, primarily because as a means of data collection the interview technique is not conjoined with particular modes of psychoanalytical interpretation. Moreover, as a research method, the approach requires no greater degree of sensitivity than any other and sits comfortably among the range of methods generally used in social research.

The aim of psychosocial interview methods is to be wholly non-directive. The researcher typically asks a single 'open question' at the start of the interview and the participant then directs the narrative, framed in their own terms of reference. The approach is designed to facilitate memory work, producing a *relational account* that is shaped through non-linear 'free associations' of thought. In the *Behind Closed Doors* project participants were asked: 'Tell me about significant emotional events in your life'. Participants' responses tripped

back and forth across the lifecourse. Familiarity with the research topic may have framed the conceptual boundaries around individuals' stories but this did not appear to delimit people's recall of wide ranging experience, nor did it contain the emotional scope of these stories. Experiences of great happiness were mixed with those of deep sadness and grief. Diverse and often conflicting arrays of emotions spanned across multifarious relationships and networks of intimacy. In Brian's biographical narrative interview he moved between experiences and subject positions – son, father, friend and colleague – making connections between events and his behaviour in these scenarios. His account was not chronologically ordered but was constituted through relational connections, weaving together a story of continuity, structured through feelings.

In addition to the biographical narrative interviews, semi-structured interviews were also completed. These interviews were designed to hone in on research concerns, oriented around events and experiences described in data from different methods. This thematic focusing of questions was continued through focus/group interviews. In my research these group interview data came from topic focused discussion within families, between family and friends, and among siblings. To include this broad spectrum of discussions under the umbrella of focus group research may stretch the methodological imagination, but data in this vein were all analysed through this framework. Focus group discussions were targeted towards 'sensitive topics' such as children and sexuality. Discussions elicited data on what informed personal opinion and

sense making practices, and the ways that social, cultural and historical context structure family processes.

- **Vignettes and photographs**

Like focus groups, participants' discussion of third party vignettes and photographs was oriented around research themes, aiming to examine their perceptions and beliefs at the social level. Five vignettes and six photographs were presented to participants – these will be individually described as necessary in the later sections. Different scenarios were presented to parents and children. Children's scenarios aimed to generate talk around the management of public–private expressions of parent–child intimacy and the role of peer groups on behaviour and understandings of sexuality.

Vignettes and photographs presented to parents allowed me to talk directly about the management of boundaries around children and sexuality and adult–child intimacy more widely, subjects that might have been otherwise deemed 'too risky' if approached through personal experience. For example a photograph, taken from a parenting handbook, showing a man sharing a bath with a child, initiated discussion on how men, as fathers, negotiate issues of nudity and bodily contact. Parents' aired wide ranging concerns about the need to 'protect' children, set against the difficulties for men in retaining 'healthy' embodied relationships with *their* children. Responses were typically constituted through prevailing moral codes of sexuality conduct but as demonstrated in my analysis of Brian's data later on, how individuals

incorporated these normalising repertoires into their own sets of beliefs and practices was often a complicated and self-revealing process.

Mixing methods

So far I have focused on the scope and capacity of individual methods I now want to examine the potential of a *qualitative mixed methods approach* that pulls these materials together. I will show how this approach can further understandings of relational processes and the public–private intersections which shape family practices of intimacy. Mixed methods research has been a longstanding feature of sociological inquiry, combining quantitative and qualitative perspectives to examine the breadth and depth of social phenomena. Recently mixed methods studies have become ever more eclectic (Bryman, 2006) with researchers adopting 'complex methodological hybridity and elasticity' (Green & Preston, 2005: 171). In the UK, the ESRC Research Methods Programme has refined the scope and framing of mixed methods research in ways that transcend the qualitative–quantitative divide (Mason, 2006).

There are various ways to bring together the data generated through qualitative mixed methods research. In the *Behind Closed Doors* project the intensity and complexity of the data lent me towards an integrative approach. This analytical strategy aims to increase subject knowledge whilst simultaneously retaining the paradigmatic nature of each method (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006). Through case study analysis the (vertical) relational threads of a story can be traced; cross-sectional analysis brings to the fore the social–

personal (horizontal) connections (Gabb, 2008: 63). The integration of mixed methods data has enabled me to connect these different threads, weaving together the vertical and horizontal axes in order to *unpick* the fabric of family relationships.

The amount of data collected through mixed methods research, per participant, per family, productively raises both practical and epistemological issues. The need to edit, synthesize and paraphrase complex and multilayered data can lead to a narrativization of experience and the 'tidying up' of findings (McCarthy, Gillies, & Holland, 2003: 20). However as Kerry Daly reminds us, we should be mindful of any individual and/or external impetus to neaten the research picture: '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). This desire to retain 'messiness' calls into question epistemological certainties, a theme that has been taken up in recent work on the relationship between research and meaning-making (Law & Urry, 2004; Silva & Wright, 2008). John Law argues that social phenomena can be captured only fleetingly in 'momentary stability' because the research process aims to 'open space for the indefinite' (Law, 2004: 5-7).

Law advocates developing a practice of 'method assemblage' that troubles the relationship between the 'absent out-therenesses' of lived experience and the 'condensed in-herenesses' of research which crafts presence into statements and texts; producing mediations of presence, manifest absence and Otherness' (ibid: 117). He argues that method should be slow and uncertain –

a risky and troubling process. Undoing the certainties created through methods has great salience in making sense of everyday family relationships. Uncertainties accommodate the temporality of family connections and lived experience.

In my analysis of material from the *Behind Closed Doors* project I have refused to pull together a finished picture from the composite pieces of data that are available, aiming to retain the experiential loose ends that characterise lived lives. Like Law, I propose that we need to advance with tentative steps; to keep in the 'messiness' of research in analyses and representations of family relationships. My desire to muddy the familial and methodological waters aims to both reflect the complexity of relational experience and to challenge the sanitisation of families. I want to tease open the contained picture of family living which edits out sections that make uncomfortable reading and/or which trouble the researcher–participant relationship (Gabb, forthcoming).

Retaining empirical messiness in our re-presentation of findings does not mean that analytical rigour is decreased, to the contrary. I draw on the analytical approach developed by Jo Moran-Elis and colleagues, tracing a thread, theme and/or analytical question across multiple methods in the dataset to create a constellation of findings; generating a 'multi-faceted picture of phenomenon' (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006: 54). In the *Behind Closed Doors* project after reading and re-reading transcripts and studying visual materials over and again, I mapped themes and methods diagrammatically, per

individual, per family, per method in a series of grids. This was designed to make the amount of material more manageable, to illustrate patterns and intersections across the dataset, and to build up family and individual case studies. All research material was transcribed and coded thematically using data management software (NVivo), but this was mostly used in cross sectional analysis and for searches across the dataset than for structuring analysis of individual and family case studies. In some ways the manual production of these grids was labour intensive, however the time invested in their production facilitated familiarity with the data and their visual immediacy suited my way of working. Grids enabled me to see the interlacing of topics raised in different methods, facilitating methodological and conceptual analytical synergy.

Brian: a qualitative mixed methods portrait

For the remainder of this article I will draw on one case study (Brian) to illustrate how the richness and texture of material generated through an integrative qualitative mixed methods approach can retain temporality and 'absent out-thereness' in analysis. I have selected Brian not as an extraordinary case, but as a means to demonstrate how we can make sense of shifting intersections between biography, experience, social understandings and normative practices and the ways these shape everyday family relationships. Focusing on an individual case in this way does raise particular ethical concerns around confidentiality pertaining to the selection and shaping of cases (Gabb, forthcoming). Taking account of these concerns, Brian's data has been judiciously edited, for reasons of intra-family confidentiality material

from other family members has been omitted, so too the pseudonyms of his partner and children.

Brian's data are less verbose than others and he stated that he only took part because his partner wanted him to do so. Reticence was not uncommon among men in the sample however like other male participants he did appear to warm to the idea once fieldwork commenced. I have partly selected Brian because to focus on forthcoming accounts skews understandings and analysis of family life, moreover such partial accounts have leaky edges. Through careful consideration of participants' silences, bluster and defensiveness, the complexity of individuals' thought processes can be unravelled.

- **Father–child relationships**

Parenting relationships are co-created by mothers and fathers but only recently has attention focused on how these negotiations unfold and the work that men carry out as carers (Hearn et al., 2002). There is a growing canon of research on fatherhood and fathering (see Dermott, 2008 for an overview of sociological literature). In the UK this research interest mirrors and in part has been fostered by the government's family agenda. Fatherhood is currently one of the hottest topics for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCFS). In 2007 a report, 'Fathers in Britain' commissioned by the DCFS, heralded the launch of the 'Think Fathers Campaign'; an initiative jointly coordinated by the DCFS and the Fatherhood Institute to increase the visibility of fathers and promote the idea of 'active fatherhood'. The Human Fertilisation

and Embryology Act (2008) has raised the bar another notch, extending debate on what constitutes parenthood and the meaning of genetic connections between men/fathers and children. Biological connections are being steadily reinforced through legislation and policies that promote a rights and responsibilities agenda, to link together men and *their* children through paternity.

Alongside and contributing to these emerging social agendas there has been an ideological shift in social attitudes towards men and fatherhood (O'Brien, 2005) and as a consequence it is not surprising that studies in this area are characterised by a focus on the significance–insignificance of gender. It is claimed that men's reorientation towards fatherhood is evident in the emergent emotional connections that can be traced between fathers and children; it is these which frame paternal involvement rather than external gender-defined parameters such as the work–family balance (Dermott, 2008). This line of research argues that gender is becoming less crucial in understandings and practices of fatherhood. In contrast other studies point to the continuing significance of gender in terms of responsibilities and domestic relationships (Featherstone, 2009). This work suggests that the shifting landscape of family formations and paternal practices neither redress prevailing inequalities at home nor diminish the continuing presence of domestic violence which remains largely perpetrated by men (ibid, 2006).

The significance of gender in men's understandings and practices of fatherhood is directly addressed by Canadian scholar Andrea Doucet, in

analysis of men's caring role. Interrogating the question 'do men mother?' she argues that while gender shapes parenting it is not a fixed and determining factor. In her research she found 'potential elasticity' in gendered agency which offer men and women choice in how they parent, 'choices based on inclinations, skills, interests, and lifestyle issues rather than on the dictates of gender' (Doucet, 2006: 244). Doucet's argument is that there is flow and change in parenting practices, flexibility that only comes to light through multiple interviews, over time. Longitudinal studies of family relationships remain scarce (a notable exception being the ESRC-funded *Timescapes* project, http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/) and the paucity of work in this vein is likely to remain because of the long term funding commitments that longitudinal studies require. Qualitative mixed methods research however offers another way of recording the dynamic processes of parenting. The individual case study presented below demonstrates how creativity in research design and the use of multiple methods can address attitudes, sense making and experience across lifecourse from different perspectives.

Brian was extremely proud of his family and frequently mentioned their significance to his everyday life and sense of self. His assertions of familial pride were however often framed through his own failings as a parent.

> Brian (BN interview): I'm really really chuffed by my family (laughter) and I don't show it enough... because I can be a grumpy git as well sometimes...

It's difficult for me to put the right words…I suppose I'm not very eloquent... I don't feel like I'm getting the right message across sometimes. At the end of the day *my family is what I do* (my emphasis).

Brian's perceived lack of emotional capacity caused him to berate himself at regular intervals throughout the fieldwork. In everyday life as in the research, his inarticulacy appeared to exasperate him. For Brian, as with many men in the study, it was actions that spoke louder than words because all too often words simply failed them.

In data from across the methods, the father–child relationship was dominant. Brian made connections back and forth across lifecourse, from his own childhood to his current role as father, occupying different familial subject–identity positions, speaking as a parent, a sibling, and as a son. He firmly grounded his experiences and attitudes in wider gendered and generational discourses around masculine behaviour. While there may be social shifts in the patterning of fatherhood and a loosening of traditionally defined gendered roles (O'Brien 2005), many men, like Brian, perceived themselves and other men to be generally lacking in emotional expression, adhering to forms of behaviour passed down between father and son.

Brian (BN interview): I maybe don't say or do what I ought to do... ought to is the wrong word. What I feel is deserving of the moment... It could be because I never had that from my mum and dad, it could be.

It's certainly not from my father. I don't know. I'm very touchy feely with [partner] because I quite like that but not so much with the boys as well... Oh nothing's ever good enough for me... That's not true actually (laughter).

Brian's account is peppered with contradictions, areas of uncertainty and ambivalence which were smoothed over with laughter. Like other fathers in the study, he spoke of wanting to distance himself from the model of parenting that he experienced as a child, but often perceived himself to be replicating these parenting strategies. While consciously deciding how to be a father this reflexive process often left him feeling out of step with how he perceives parent–child relationships *should* be today. Brian appeared to be unable or unwilling to reconcile these contrarieties in past, present and ideal fatherhood. He identified patterns of masculine behaviour that cross between home and work as offering some form of explanation.

Brian (BN interview): I suppose I find it quite difficult to praise which is wrong really because the boys really are good kids and I need to praise them more often. I don't know why I find it difficult to do that... it could be something to do with work as well... [My boss] he's just such a hard guy to get anything out of; whatever you do is never good enough there's always a big 'but' at the end of it and this sort of stuff. I hope that doesn't drag over on me at home and everything, I'm afraid it probably does a bit.

The transmission of cultural values and gendered patterns of behaviour across work–family life are well acknowledged (Hochschild, 2003). Brian has been the primary breadwinner since the birth of his children and the workplace is an environment where he spends a lot of his time, it is therefore not surprising that these structural relationships affect the way he behaves at home. His experience of the workplace consolidates his sense that men do not emote, they do not show their feelings. Whilst contemporary research on fatherhood demonstrates that many men are working to develop emotional connections (Dermott, 2008) the clash in work–family cultures leads Brian to be critical of his perceived emotional incapacity as a father: '[it's] the emotional side, the touchy feely side I don't do that too much'.

Brian found it much easier to write about his feelings than to talk about these face-to-face, in an interview. In his diary he reflected on transitions in the parent–child relationships and the growing physical distance between father and sons. He described how he is currently working to rebuild the closeness of the father–son relationship through investment in the boys' sporting interests and the continuation of rough and tumble play, 'duff time' that was characterised as 'brilliant fun'. These mutual occasions appear to be consciously crafted by Brian as a means to effectively broker emerging relationships between himself and his children, sustaining connections and forms of affection through childhood, adolescence to independent young adulthood. The intensity of the father–son relationship may be lessening but Brian is forging new connections founded in identification: shared masculinity. In this way he is using his gender in positive ways, to build the father–son

relationship rather than seeing it as an inhibiting and detrimental factor; the root of emotional incapacity.

- **Boundaries of intimacy**

In contrast to Brian's perceived emotional awkwardness around the father–son relationship, at other times he described himself and the family ethos as open-minded and expressive, freely using embodied contact to consolidate a sense of closeness. In response to one photograph depicting a man and toddler sharing a bath, he was keen to assert the ordinariness of this activity and spoke about how nudity and parent–child bodily contact were part of healthy family relationships. In other contexts the activity of bathing can reinforce imbalances in power relations (Twigg, 2000) but research has shown that some men use the proximity of bodies afforded through father–child bathing to create the sense of embodied intimacy that can be experienced by mothers through pregnancy and breastfeeding (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). Brian's explanation of why he found this picture 'ace' is most interesting.

> Brian (photo interview): One of the best things you could do with your kids in the bath. End of story. That's good. I've got no problem with that; absolutely ace... Yes, he's enjoying it, the kid's enjoying it and I've done it with my kids...
> Interviewer: Would it ever get to be a problem?
> Brian: No, I don't think it would. I've been in a bath with 12 other rugby players and guess what happens in there. Okay it's not quite the same as that but it's not far off it (laughter).

The analogy Brian invokes here is flippant and is inevitably open to alternative homo-social/homo-erotic interpretations, but it is also quite insightful read in the way he intended. He is expressing how embodied closeness and nudity do not pose a threat by default because if the boundaries around the relationship are clearly defined an activity remains safe. For Brian, the father–child relationship is non sexual so too the relationship between the group of rugby players; neither scene is sexualized because desire in both contexts is absent. Thus, within his framework of understanding, his analogy is well made and serves to consolidate statements made elsewhere on how different kinds of relationships need clear cut boundaries.

Brian's need for affective clarity and his desire to contain distinct forms of feeling were crystallised in his discussion of one particular vignette. In the *Behind Closed Doors* project vignettes were designed to interrogate the setting of boundaries around relationships and relating practices. In response to a scenario that described a woman's experience of emotional closeness to her husband and a male work colleague, Brian became quite unsettled:

> Brian (vignette interview): I think that the marriage probably isn't working as it should be... It doesn't make me very comfortable just reading it.... Particularly the intimacy bit... I think human nature is that if it's that intimate then it will probably end up being sexual as well... It's a betrayal of trust... Well she [partner] is my closest friend so there we are.

On several occasions Brian invoked the rhetoric of friendship to demonstrate his belief in the primacy of the adult sexual couple relationship, his own couple relationship being central to his emotional sense of self. He called upon sets of culturally inscribed 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 2003) to differentiate between couple intimacy (which includes friendship and desire) and relationships with friends (which are, for Brian, non-sexual/intimate). Trust is a defining factor here but an intimate friendship could become difficult to contain and feelings might leak over into desire.

Brian's compulsion to seal the boundaries around distinct kinds of relationships can also be seen in his emotion map (see figure 1). In data from this method there was a clear differentiation between public, semi-public, and private space. Brian characterised the parents' bedroom as the place of greatest affection and intimacy, shared only between husband and wife. He did not mark the regular occasions when the youngest son had joined the parents in their bed, interactions that he fondly described elsewhere as 'real nice little boy cuddling'; these are contained to the sofa, downstairs. It is fair to surmise that one explanation for his reticence in depicting parent–child affection of this kind on his emotion map is likely to be because the basic emotions that were characterised on stickers did not allow him to establish to his satisfaction the unequivocal distinctions between different kinds of feeling. The boundaries around understandings of intimacy and sexuality were too leaky for him to contain and thus he looked to other (methodological) means to reinforce categorical distinctions. In this instance and at other times it was

the things that remained unsaid or undocumented that were as interesting as those that were more readily recounted.

- **Silences and defensive strategies**

Qualitative mixed methods research facilitates analysis through a prism that produces multilayered portraits of self. Silences and defensive strategies often mask uncertainties and point to the complexities of subjectivity. For example Brian's confidence and self assurance was counterpoised with doubt and self deprecation. There were notably few occasions when he talked about looking after himself and/or mentioned activities that were solely for his own emotional rewards. In his dairy however he did detail one occasion when he was out walking the pet dog.

> Brian (diary): Up at 7.00am to walk the dog – too late to see the barn owl, but at least you could see where it had shitted. It's nice walking the dog and it looks like spring is on the way – snowdrops are coming out...
> Brilliant walk – the dog went nuts chasing everything that moved whilst I listened to [music].

Brian clearly relishes the tranquillity of dog walks and they provide solitary pleasures that are evidently much appreciated. His description of the scene is open and poetic but conversely closed and guarded; the pleasures of the experience being overwritten with coarse language. In Brian's data and across the family dataset it was clear that shock tactics and sarcasm were common

currency. Quick fire banter characterise family exchanges that were observed and the group interview. In these data and elsewhere however it is clear that Brian's partner finds this increasingly tiresome. Her unease was acknowledged by both husband and sons but this combative form of communication persisted and was ultimately identified by Brian as a family way of being: 'We just don't take life too seriously'. Elsewhere he was more insightful and recognised his use of humour as his way of coping with otherwise difficult, stressful and/or meaningful situations.

> Brian (BN interview): To be honest I'm like that at work as well...
> There's something I've learnt about myself as well is that if I'm not
> comfortable with something then I tend to do something funny rather
> than get serious... I don't like conflict and I've found that's a good way
> of getting out of it.

Running through Brian's account are ambivalences, silences and defensive strategies that were designed to contain the picture he was presenting. These are in all likelihood both conscious and unknowing strategies depending on the topic of discussion and whether Brian had previously processed the experiences being described. In the group interview he openly acknowledged that he 'bottles things up' and is 'not very good at sharing feelings'. He admitted that he had found the research process useful as it had opened his eyes to family processes that were unfamiliar and/or subsumed beneath the routine events of family life. However his account remained full of contradictions and complexity. He talked freely about his adult–partner

relationships but faltered in his descriptions of father–child connections. At times he celebrated the dialogic foundations of his family then said he found it difficult to talk about his feelings. Intergenerational ties, father–son–father, were mentioned and dismissed.

To some extent Brian does unpick the account he put forward and this reflexivity is most interesting. To a far greater degree his forceful assertions of opinion, underscored by the closing down of dialogue – 'no question', 'without a doubt' and so on – mask an underlying sense of insecurity. Feelings seep out through his descriptions and (nervous) laughter, but it is not my intention to piece these together to re-construct a holistic portrait through which the 'real Brian' can be manifest – if this task were indeed even possible. Presenting causal factors mined from meanings and interpretations of his data ultimately occludes the complexity that is evident in his account of family relationships. Subjectivity cannot be readily reconstructed from the fragments of self that are presented in research. Our interpretations remain partial and are grounded in the ways that *we* know ourselves, emotional processes that shape our translation of others. The disconnections in Brian's account illustrate the parameters that can frame our self-knowing: the uncertainties and temporalities of family relationships; the dynamic intersections between the social, historical, biographical and personal facets of our subjectivity.

Conclusion: accounting for relational messiness

Integrating qualitative methods does inevitably produce rich and complex understandings of personal experience and family relationships but I do not

want to claim that this comprehensive picture captures the reality of lived lives. A qualitative mixed methods approach is valuable precisely because it evinces the emotional messiness, uncertainties and fluidity that constitute relational experience. Brian's networks of relationships are complex and interwoven. Work, family, friendships and childhood experience intersect and combine to form his emotional repertoires and relational practices. In multifarious, often contradictory, conscious and unconscious ways, Brian presents a picture of relational process – dynamic, continuous, emergent connections that are constantly adapting.

Pulling together the threads in his data does not create a single picture so much as many constitutive interdependent pictures: a family, a father, a son, a man and so on. Thematic analysis can freeze the frame, conjuring up series of analytical snapshots but these comprise momentary meanings that disappear as quickly as they emerge, as the patterning of relational threads take on new formations. Throwing a whole bundle of methods at a subject does not decipher hitherto opaque processes, it is not new methods per se or novel combinations of methods which generate insight, greater understanding is instead afforded through attentiveness to the *subtle interplay of threads* which criss-cross the breadth and depth of data. Patterns among threads are sometimes readily apparent and at other times fleeting and intangible, focusing on the different ways that they are woven together evinces the *contingency of lived lives*.

The focus on contingency in accounts of family life in many ways resists categorical interpretation and/or the fixity of generalisation. Tracing themes such as gender, generation and commonalities in parenting practices across the dataset is possible and remains an analytical imperative if studies are to add to knowledge of social phenomena. However the integration of qualitative mixed methods material serves to unsettle ideas of definable trends as much as it brings these to light. The complexity of empirical research does not neatly fit into tightly packaged generalisations which edit, abstract and reduce 'real lives' to sanitised measurements of experience; this process obscures the vitality of living and lived lives (Mason, 2008).

In analysis of qualitative mixed methods data, the intricacies of the material are temporarily located. Meanings are produced through relational connections which shift with 'each twist of the analytical kaleidoscope' (McCarthy et al., 2003: 19) and which shift again as individuals' subjectivities and experience are reoriented. As such I suggest that it is perhaps more pertinent to talk about the *patterning of experience* rather than patterns of experience in analyses of qualitative mixed methods data. The approach is not designed to trace trends in family practices and networks of kin, this task is better suited to micro–macro, qualitative–quantitative analyses. Instead I suggest that a qualitative mixed methods approach is best suited to the examination of the intricate ways that individuals experience family lives, a messy process that inevitably produces loose ends. For Brian, he cannot shrug off the different factors that intersect to shape his perceptions of how to

be a good father. To tell one story of Brian would be to separate out the strands that are in every other respect interwoven.

Leaving in methodological and emotional uncertainties is not analytical sloppiness instead it reflects the contingency of relational living – the ephemera and flux of relationships across lifecourse. The different layers of meaning and understandings that come to the fore through the messy process of research facilitate analysis of the public–private patterning of intimate life and our emotional capacities to love and care. Case study analysis is a useful starting point in this respect, illustrating how biography, experience, social processes and normalising discourses shape, and are shaped by, everyday interactions. From this point we can begin to trace the patterning of affective lives and advance a *dynamic sociological analysis* of family relationships.

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[1] The *Behind Closed Doors* project was a pilot project funded by the ESRC (RES-000-22-0854). Fieldwork was completed over a 14 month period in 2005-6.

[2] For a critical engagement with ethics in family research and how increased ethical regulation affected my own research practice see (Gabb, forthcoming)

Appendix 1

Family	Members of household	Diary	Emotion Map	Semi-structured interview	BNIM interview	Vignettes	Photo images	Obs	Focus-group interviews	Number of methods completed
1	Mother	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		7
	Father	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		7
	1 child <5									n/a
2	Mother	√	√	√	√	√	√			6
	Son 17									0
3	Mother		√	√	√			√		4
	Father							√		1
	2 children <5									n/a
4	Father	√		√	√	√	√			5
	2 children <5									n/a
5	Mother	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		7
	Father	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		7
	Daughter 17	√	√	√	√			√		5
6	Mother	√	√	√	√	√	√			6
	Father	√		√	√					3
	Daughter 8	√	√						√	3
	Daughter 10	√	√						√	3
	Son 12		√						√	2
	Son 5		√						√	2
	Son 13									0
7	Mother	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	8
	Father	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	8
	Son 12		√			√	√	√	√	5
	Son 14		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	7
8	Mother	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		7
	Father									0
	Son 9		√	√					√	3
	Son 11									0
9	Mother	√	√	√	√	√	√			6
	Father									0
	Daughter 6		√	√						2
	1 child <5									n/a
10	Mother		√	√	√					3
	Father									0
	2 children <5									n/a

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