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## Home truths: ethical issues in family research

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## **Home Truths: Ethical Issues in Family Research**

### **Abstract**

This article interrogates the shifting ethical contours of research on contemporary childhood and family living. I reflect on increases in ethical regulation and the role of ethics review panels. Drawing on original data from empirical research I examine some of the ethical issues that arise in studies of family life with particular attention to qualitative mixed methods research and the use of psychosocial approaches. I propose that multilayered in-depth approaches require us to consider carefully ethical standpoints, affecting how we thread together individual and/or family case studies. Unsettling stories in research on emotional–social worlds refine our understandings of 'harm' and 'distress' and reconfigure ideas of 'responsible knowing'. Qualitative mixed methods research situates 'messy', conflicting and unfavourable data as part of ordinary parenthood, reformulating ethical and epistemological dilemmas for researchers of personal lives.

**Key words:** family studies; research ethics; ethical regulation; qualitative mixed methods; sociology; psychosocial approaches; responsible knowing

## Home Truths: Shifting Ethical Contours in Family Research

### Introduction

In empirical qualitative studies of family life the researcher inevitably becomes embedded in the personal worlds of those being researched. Spending significant amounts of time with a family means that you get to know them, to share some of their life experiences in the immediate sense – over time. This investment of time and self in others' lives can lead to *vested interest*; a commitment to participants can come into conflict with the academic need for a critical analytical mind. Feminist research (such as Mauthner, et al. 2002) has grappled with the 'push-me-pull-you' feelings which can emerge in first sharing then interpreting others' lives. In many ways debate around feminist research and methodologies is well rehearsed, the argument has been won and feminist ethics (in some form and variation) underpin most social research in this area. However in the light of increased ethical regulation in the social sciences there are ethical issues that require renewed consideration.

Methodological developments in approaches to the study of family relationships and personal life require us to return to some of these debates, to reflect on the ethical and epistemological dilemmas that are faced by contemporary researchers in family studies.

In this article I engage with current debates on ethics and research practice. In the first section I introduce my recent empirical research and account for the qualitative methods that were used and some of the ethical issues which they raise. I explore how the intensification of ethical regulation has shaped families and childhood studies and my own research practice. In particular, I

interrogate the role of ethics review panels and the defining of criteria for informed consent. Norman Denzin has called attention to the recent increase in mixed methods analysis and the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data. He argues that one problem with this process is that the two approaches are 'in contradiction' and therefore you are not comparing like with like (Denzin 2009). I explore the ethical frameworks that determine contemporary empirical research and focus on the value and ethical challenges posed by *qualitative mixed methods* research. A qualitative mixed methods approach requires ethical and analytical processes to be revisited, in particular how to manage multiple accounts of self and different perspectives on shared relationships in case study analyses. I examine the move towards psychosocial approaches in research on families and personal relationships and how psychosocial methods tease open the conflation of 'harm' and 'distress' in qualitative research.

In the final section I return to feminist ideas on 'responsible knowing' and the researcher's role in advancing meanings and understandings of family lives. I propose that the multidimensional data collected in qualitative mixed methods research does produce comprehensive accounts of experience that access the complexity of macro–micro, personal–social, emotional and physical connections. However I caution against the tendency to tidy up and sanitise the 'messiness' of everyday experience in order to produce academic knowledge. I suggest that if we keep in the multidimensional layers and narrative loose ends that characterise stories of individuals' emotional–social

worlds, then we can retain some of the uncertainties that shape and are shaped by everyday family relationships.

- **Research data**

The discussion advanced in this article draws on empirical findings from a methodological pilot project *Behind Closed Doors*.<sup>1</sup> This project aimed to interrogate different qualitative methods of researching family intimacy and to examine the emotional–biographical–social patterning of family lives and intimate living. The sample was based in the North of England and my analysis of material and ethical issues in family research are located in this English context. Data were collected from 10 families using diaries, emotion maps, semi-structured and biographical narrative interviews, vignettes, visual imagery, observation, and focus/group interviews, producing a dynamic portrait of family relationships and routine practices of intimacy (for full details see Gabb 2008).

In the original research design *all* methods were to be completed by *all* family members, in practice however this was unrealistic. In many families at least one individual did not want to participate and significantly this disinterest ordinarily came from the male adult in the household. To continue with the original design therefore imposed an exclusionary criterion that perpetuated gendered and generational inequalities of power which typically shape family life. This strategy would have silenced the women and children who wanted to talk. My decision to adopt a more flexible approach did compromise the degree to which comparative analysis could be made between families

however as a feminist researcher I could not debar women and children's voices simply because male partners were disinterested and/or disapproving. In the end, individuals completed methods that appealed to them, averaging 4 methods per person: 6 methods per mother; 3 methods per father; 3 methods per child. Methods completion rate according to household ranged from 19%-88%, averaging 52% across the dataset.

The lack of uniformity in household participation made the analytical process particularly challenging. In the first instance I mapped themes and methods diagrammatically in a series of grids, tracing thematic patterns across the dataset and building up individual and family case studies. Through the integration of methods I aimed to move beyond the versioning of affect through different modes of talk; to evince the interiority of affective experience, the gendered, generational and subjective experience of family intimacy and the impact of external socio-cultural factors on 'private lives'. I approached analysis from an interpretationist perspective, suggesting that multiple accounts produce equally 'valid realities', framed through participants' individual (social, biographical, generational etc) standpoints (Jessop 1981).<sup>2</sup> The richness of material across the dataset required close reading as individual, family and thematic analyses were advanced. Through this time-consuming process ethical questions around how to manage both the quantity and complex quality of material took on particular significance. For example how to analyse multilayered accounts of relational experience, simultaneously retaining the integrity of individual accounts but not revealing identity among

the family group. I consider this and other ethical issues in analysing mixed methods family data later on.

Most methods used in the study are self explanatory but a couple may be unfamiliar, notably emotion maps and biographical narrative interviews. The emotion map is a technique that I devised especially for the project. This graphic method requires a floor plan of the family home to be created and a copy of this is given out to each participant along with a set of coloured emoticon stickers, representing happiness, sadness, anger, and love/affection. Each person (or intimate) including friends and pets in some cases, was designated a specific coloured sticker and participants placed these stickers on their floor plan, to indicate where an interaction or experience had occurred. A key merit of this kind of visual method is that it produces comparable data – from adults and children – using the medium of a sticker chart which is both familiar and known to engage younger children's interest.

Graphic materials provided a *visual impression* of the emotional geographies of families. These materials were analysed as data with the type and location of interactions being charted within the family and across the dataset as a whole. The method visualised deeply private activities such as shared moments of intimacy or routine practices of parent–child 'bed hopping' that might be otherwise invisible to the research gaze and therefore omitted from the analytical register. The factors that affect these experiences of ordinary family intimacy were then interrogated in follow up semi-structured interviews

including individuals' framing of these interactions and the defining criteria used in the setting of boundaries around in/appropriate behaviour and affective conduct. Participants' disclosure of these kinds of personal details and what could be construed as 'risky practices' was a key anxiety for the ethics review panel that considered this project. I reflect on my experience of this process later on.

The other method that may require more explanation is the biographical narrative interview. Psychosocial approaches are growing in popularity, proving particularly useful in the study of parenthood and family relationships (for example Phoenix and Hollway 2008; Thomson, et al. 2008). This approach moves beyond the semi-structured 'conversation with a purpose' that is typical in much feminist sociological research. The 'free association narrative interview' (FANI) (Hollway and Jefferson 2000) or 'biographical narrative integrative method' (BNIM) (Wengraf 2001) aim to explore the situated, experiential, and emotional context of participants' accounts and the ways that past experiences affect understandings and representations of self . BNIM and FANI approaches claim to empower participants by being wholly non-directive. The researcher typically asks a single 'open' question at the start of the interview and the participant then takes the lead, talking freely about the experiences they choose, framed in their own terms of reference. During the interview the researcher adopts the role of active listener: they neither interject nor reorient the narrative however this unfolds (see Wengraf 2001 for a practical guide).



In the *Behind Closed Doors* project this method was highly effective. One mother recounted a succession of difficult and sometimes violent relationships, making connections between emotions that linked one event with another. Another mother detailed how troubles in sibling and extended family relationships have been exacerbated by her parenting choices. Some mothers oriented their accounts around the 'life changing experience' of childbirth, in other accounts this event was not even mentioned. Had I adopted a more traditional approach and used semi-structured interviews it is highly likely that presuppositions about the significance of childbirth in the lives of mothers and fathers would have shaped the interview schedule. Instead data from the open, biographical narrative interviews de-centred this event from the study and highlighted the different factors that affect individual experiences of family relationships and intimate living. Later on I focus on some of the ethical questions posed by psychosocial approaches, especially around psychoanalytic interpretations of others' experience.

### **Ethical regulation and the ethics of care**

In the UK, the study of families, personal relationships and children's lives has largely developed from and advances a feminist standpoint that is shaped through an ethics of care. Researchers have paid particular attention to the vulnerability of a group (Elam and Fenton 2003), the age of participants (Caskey and Rosenthal 2005) and the degree to which research intrudes on individuals' private life at home (Brannen 1988). The privacy of family life and couple relationships retains an especially strong currency in Western societies (Edwards 1993). Family research has typically drawn on a reflexive practice to

respect this sense of privacy and the sensitivities involved in studying people's personal lives and relationships.

Researchers in the field have tended to find a way to work *with* formalised codes of practice, recognising that it is hard to inscribe rules that address the breadth and complexity of empirical studies. A multitude of decisions are made: 'Rarely are there specific ethical rules for how we make these decisions; rather we must draw on ethical principles in how best to act with integrity' (Daly 2007). A 'consequentialist' ethical position is commonplace wherein considerations around the greatest good to the greatest number of people are balanced against the individual 'rights' of the participant (see Holm 1997 for an overview of different ethical positions). This ethical framework is further refined through feminist standpoints forming what has been termed a 'consequentialist-feminist-ethics'. In this model the researcher is implicated 'in a feminist, caring, committed ethic', shaped through the long-term trusting researcher-participant relationship (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). This feminist, 'ethics of care' model connects the researcher to the production and generation of knowledge, foregrounding researcher integrity (Edwards and Mauthner 2002).

Recently however there has been a notable increase in ethical regulation of humanities and social sciences (HSS) qualitative research in the UK and across Western research communities which in many ways works against this feminist *caring* researcher-participant relationship. Emergent procedures of regulatory control have resulted in systems of governmentality that locate the

researcher and the research subject in positions of potential conflict, engaged in a dualistic relationship which requires mediation. In this combative scenario 'certified ethicists' have become designated as the gatekeepers of research, presiding over ethics committees that are designed to protect innocent research subjects from the 'barbarian researcher' who is always trying to take advantage in some way (Halse and Honey 2007).

The development of ethical regulation in HSS research is inspired by biomedical sciences research and clinical trials, however as many commentators point out the argument is fundamentally flawed; the ethical imperative to protect social science research subjects has no empirical basis (Atkinson 2009). Whereas biomedical research can pose a potential risk to participants, the degree of risk in HSS research is in no way equivalent: 'At most there is a potential for causing minor and reversible emotional distress or some measure of reputational damage' (Dingwall 2008). The personal impacts (on both researcher and participant) that emotional distress may have are not contested, the point being made is that the participant has not been put *at risk* through the recalling of events and experience. As I shall discuss later in my analysis of psychosocial approaches, there is a significant difference between the risk of causing distress and the risk of causing harm.

On a practical level the consequences of formalised ethical regulation is counterproductive to the spirit and practice of empirical social science research. Ethics review panels are asking researchers to predict what it is they are looking for (Clark and Sharf 2007), something which runs counter to

the emergent processes of empirical research (Murphy and Dingwall 2007). Researchers are required to make assurances on the basis of guesswork and/or conformity to a set of restrictions which ultimately contain the scope of study. An 'ethical schism' is being forged; the technologies of ethics review are transforming research into 'a performance... a suite of textual competencies' – producing 'ethics-speak' that resonates with the regulatory bodies but which is meaningless in most practical respects (Halse and Honey 2007).

Given the heady mix of current HSS research ethical regulation, institutional cultures of risk assessment and wider cultural moves towards a 'risk averse' society (Furedi and Bristow 2008), it was perhaps inevitable that an empirical project on intimacy and family relationships would encounter stringent attention as it passed through my university's Human Participants and Materials Ethics Committee (HPMEC). Children are perceived as especially vulnerable in Western society and my research *could* pose a threat to children's emotional wellbeing, introducing anxiety and/or causing distress. I had to ensure that parents and children were made aware of the procedures that were in place if concerns for an individual's safety arose, for example through disclosures of bullying or abuse. Information on external support agencies and the details of a contact person outside the research project had to be readily available. These and other such procedures are legitimate and were already planned for, what I did not anticipate was the degree of anxiety that would be caused by my analytical perspective and my adoption of a qualitative mixed methods approach.

Differences in disciplinary frameworks and epistemological and methodological variability in the meanings of 'risk' and 'risk framing' (Henwood, et al. 2008) undoubtedly framed the exchanges between myself and the HPMEC. Panel expertise in this area is often based in health sciences, psychology and child development. My sociological proposal was shrouded in the language of exploration and the unknown, without firm hypotheses and/or defining theoretical interpretative frameworks. The regulation of research practice has initiated a broader questioning of the politics of evidence with trustworthiness of qualitative approaches being called into question (Denzin 2009). The move towards standardised and objective outcomes was antithetical to my research design. The study was deigned to *test* the effectiveness of different methods and the efficacy of a qualitative mixed methods approach. My candour in saying that I did not know the kinds of data that some methods might produce did not fit standardised criteria. My presentation of intimacy as part of ordinary intergenerational family practices appeared to cause alarm.

In the end the documentation that gained approval from the ethics review panel comprised 32 A4 pages of information including full text of the project website, all associated publicity materials and a detailed description of all methods to be used. The participant consent form comprised 2 A4 pages, containing 8 separate points that required written confirmation plus itemised consent to all 8 methods. Thus in total participants were asked to provide written consent to 16 separate items. Consent forms are intended to ensure

that participants are fully cognisant of what they are signing up for, but standardised checklists of this kind are also designed to provide an audit trail that will protect the institution from litigation and/or any challenge to its research prestige (Lincoln and Tierney 2004). I was initially deeply concerned about the legal tenor of the document and the sheer effort it would require to make each participant fully aware of all the points included. In practice participants listened to the researchers' overviews and glibly ticked all the boxes and signed the form without any difficulty or fuss. The only comments made were about the extent of bureaucracy these days: the researchers remained silent!

Experience is divided on the *usefulness* of ethics panels and formalised ethical guidelines, some suggest that these can helpfully alert the researcher to potential ethical issues which may be encountered (Punch 1986). Others suggest that they provide an artificial sense of ethical security which delimits the researcher's reflexive practice (Mason 1996), failing to take account of the 'tensions, fluidity and uncertainties' that characterise empirical research of everyday lives (Birch, et al. 2003) and thus potentially restricting the scope of studies (Tierney and Corwin 2007). In practice for this research project the intervention of the ethics committee was helpful in one respect, refocusing my attention on the sensitivity of the topic, something that I had become desensitised to because of my over-familiarity with the project. It gave me a wake up call about how others might perceive my research as methodologically and conceptually risky. Ultimately the ethics committee approval process remained a stage gate to be cleared; it was *ongoing consent*

that remained crucial – the relational contract between the researcher and the participant. This agreement remains based on trust and respect which stretches far beyond legal obligations and formalised risk assessments.

- **Confidentiality and case studies**

The need to establish a trusting research relationship is paramount in research on family living because participants are simultaneously revealing identity publicly to the outside world and just as importantly privately *among family members*. For example in the *Behind Closed Doors* project insecurities permeated many individual accounts, contradicting the family persona that was at other times presented and/or that was described in others' accounts. Across data from different methods, one mother's *public* characterisation as the matriarchal figurehead of the family began to unravel as more multidimensional understandings of her motivations and sense of self began to emerge. The composite case study that developed portrayed a woman who was ambivalent about her designation in this organising role and who felt a degree of resentment as her own needs and desires went unacknowledged. Piecing together this case study rendered this woman vulnerable as it challenged the facade that she and her family had constructed. In my analysis of research data it was relatively easy to ensure that the family's anonymity was protected. It was much harder to prevent close intimates and family members from gleaning this mother's identity from the analytical portrait that I presented and in doing so to find out previously 'private' information.

It is extremely difficult to conceal the identity of someone from those around them – those who know their story. There are various strategies that have proven successful in ‘protecting’ individual identity in families research (see Mauthner 1997). The most obvious way is to avoid producing family case studies however the purpose of my qualitative mixed methods research design was to generate data on the complexity of personal experience and family relationships. To fully unpack the rich, multilayered accounts of relational living that were collected it was necessary to deploy multiple analytical strategies. Case study data pulled together the individual threads of a story. Cross-sectional data, across individual and family narratives and the dataset as a whole, generated thematic connections. The 'integration' of mixed methods data (Mason 2006) pulled together these different threads, tracing intersections between biographical, experiential and social factors, making visible the layers of subjectivity and meaning making in family relationships. The ethical challenge was how to advance this comprehensive analytical strategy in ways that honoured the trusting research relationship.

There is no doubt that it would have been easier to sacrifice case study analysis of research data as this would have alleviated some of the ethical dilemmas that I faced. However to forsake an approach that is so evidently illuminating simply to salve a researcher's conscience is surely an ethical over-reaction. I contend that family researchers have to find ways to effectively work through issues of confidentiality: to refine our ethical practice. In analysis of data from the *Behind Closed Doors* project I undertook many strategies which aimed to retain the integrity of the material and the stories



being told while honouring the trusting research–participant relationship. For example I was most cautious about the cases I selected and in the end I published only one 'family case study' (Gabb 2008) and this was judiciously edited. My criteria for choosing this family, beyond them being an interesting case in point, included the daughter's age; she was 17 years old and therefore her participation was considered and mediated through understandings of 'informed consent'. Another factor was that the family were going through a period of transition on many levels and as a consequence were already engaged in an individual and collective reflexive process. Disclosures that were analysed were already known among the family group and all new insights that emerged were explicitly stated as most welcome.

In this and other 'cases' the sheer volume of data collected, per participant, per family, did also raise another set of ethical issues. The breadth and depth of material meant that there was a need to edit, synthesize, paraphrase and summarise which tended to narrativize experience across the individual and/or family dataset. This was a source of concern for me and I had to consciously resist the temptation to pull together experiential loose ends into a totalising picture. My analytical approach aimed to thread together the connections offered by participants without recourse to overarching narrative interpretations which remain either speculative and/or derive from external sets of meanings. It is this latter point which perhaps rings the loudest ethical alarm bells for many sociologists and which are at the forefront of many objections to psychosocial research.

## **Ethics and psychosocial research**

Psychosocial approaches have been shown to be particularly useful in advancing understanding of parenthood, families and relationships (Phoenix and Hollway 2008; Roseneil 2006; Thomson, et al. 2008). The biographical narrative integrative method (BNIM) (Wengraf 2001) and the free association narrative interview (FANI) (Hollway and Jefferson 2000) have been developed to examine the interplay between the psychic and the social, located in the cultural context and biography of the individual (Roseneil 2006). BNIM and FANI methods share underlying principles, suggesting that in the course of an interview the participant will reveal to the researcher the *significance* of experiences and/or events, generating understanding and facilitating interpretation through the research encounter. This interpretative aspect is the point at which the two approaches diverge.

The BNIM approach uses an integrative paradigm developed around the *Gestalt* principle, claiming that 'the spontaneous pattern of the speaker' exposes a *biographical narrative* that can be analysed using the biographic-interpretive method (Wengraf 2001). Through observation of '*the presentation and process of telling the story*' the researcher can see the structure of an individual's story construction (ibid: 232). Like the BNIM approach, the FANI method remains concerned with individuals' Gestalts, the processes through which they make sense of their stories (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). Through the interview process *shared meanings* are produced, constructed through the researcher-participant interview encounter. The interpretive framework however shifts towards the terrain of therapeutic counselling and

psychoanalysis. Hollway and Jefferson suggest that the participant's 'free association' of thoughts reveal the constitutive connections between the inner and outer worlds; connections that 'cannot be known except through another subject; in this case, the researcher'. The focus is on the *defended subject*, 'the self is forged out of unconscious defences against anxiety' (ibid: 3-4); ideas that draw on the psychoanalytical theorising of Melanie Klein.

In the first instance I want to address ethical questions around the process of data collection in these psychosocial approaches before I move on to more substantive concerns. In the *Behind Closed Doors* project the psychosocial interview facilitated the opening up of the participant to themselves. It focused their attention on potentially novel emotional connections that were previously unacknowledged or unknown. Some participants did recount difficult and/or painful experiences and some of these may have been 'unprocessed' to a lesser or greater extent. For the individual participant however this emotional unburdening did generally appear to be and was explicitly described by some as a positive experience; findings that corroborate Hollway and Jefferson's claim that it can be 'reassuring and therapeutic to talk about any upsetting event in a safe context' (Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 87). While this unearthing of experiences and emotions does cause alarm in some sociological quarters, these anxieties pertain to the association of the interview with catharsis, akin to a psycho-therapeutic encounter more than to the specificity of research approaches which address sensitive emotionally-intense subjects.

While I would want to distance my research practice from associations with therapy and/or counselling, biographically focused in-depth interviews are designed to elicit personal disclosure, whether intentional or unintentional (Pidgeon, et al. 2008); a divestment of self that unfolds in the telling of a participant's story. The intensity of the interview scenario and the sense of rapport and intimacy created through this one-to-one experience can 'seduce' a participant into revealing 'secrets' (Clark and Sharf 2007), disclosing information and feelings which they might have preferred to keep private or hidden (Duncombe and Jessop 2002). In FANI and BNIM research, the main difference is that the unstructured interview format simply affords a wider scope, providing participants with an *open space* to think through personal and relational connections in their lives. The psychosocial interview provides 'the context of a relationship with someone who was capable of listening... was not competing for attention, who could reflect back in questions and comments a recognition of [the participant's] experiences' (Hollway and Jefferson 2000).

Hollway and Jefferson claim that the method does not pose a problem in itself, instead, they suggest, we should redress ethical protocols which emphasize the need to avoid causing 'harm' and 'distress'. They point out that talking about emotionally significant events can be highly distressing for some individuals but that being distressed in this way is quite distinct from being harmed. The two terms, normally conjoined in ethical protocols, need to be separated. I concur. Participants are not powerless in research; they can chose to delimit disclosure, close down steams of thought, steer away from

personal stories and redirect the narrative. Indeed these strategies are acknowledged as commonplace and represent the mainstay of psychoanalytically-informed readings of the unconscious through the interview text. To suggest however that psychosocial methods will encourage interviewees to divest hitherto unknown and/or emotionally damaging 'stories' after only a few hours of contact is arguably naïve. This presumption derives from a culture of risk assessment and is not a response to ethical issues in research practice.

In all forms of research on relational life, it is important to bear in mind that 'emotions are a normal part of talking about family experience' (Daly 2007); it is unrealistic to expect all of these emotions to be wholly positive. It is how researchers *respond* to emotional disclosures that needs careful management, providing an empathetic listener who does not offer advice or solutions to problems and who refrains from making moral judgements even when opinions challenge our own beliefs and understandings. In this sense psychosocial interviews are not that different to other techniques which are ordinarily used to study sensitive topics and personal lives, such as life history approaches, open and semi-structured interviews.

It remains the *interpretive* aspect of psychosocial approaches which set them apart and that represent the biggest epistemological stumbling block for sociological inquiry, especially when interpretations are advanced through psychoanalytical theorising. In the FANI approach the researcher is looking for the story behind the story, searching for connections within the interview 'text'

that remain psychologically buried, hidden from the individual – 'the defended subject'. For many sociologists, this oversteps the ethical mark and affords unmediated power to the researcher's meaning-making. Is it the researcher's place to identify someone else's subjectivity for them? There is resistance to this kind of *over-interpretation* of participants' stories of selfhood because it implies that the researcher can decipher from a few hours of interaction more about an individual than they may know about themselves. In the end the legitimacy of the approach is dependent on the theoretical and/or disciplinary standpoint of the researcher, a 'debate' that is longstanding and one which I do not want to enter into here.<sup>3</sup>

What is clear from the findings of the *Behind Closed Doors* project is that the approach is highly effective in eliciting rich and wide ranging individual accounts on relational experience. In the project, at the beginning of the interview, a single 'question' was posed to participants: 'Tell me about significant emotional events in your life'? The method was completed midway through the research schedule therefore the focus of the research – family relationships – was already well established and topic familiarity did effectively set the conceptual boundaries of participants' stories, but it did not contain their recall. The experiences that were described and the narrative connections that were made tripped back and forth across the lifecourse and included feelings of happiness, elation, sadness and grief, often framed through unremarkable ordinary events. Careful handling of the interview encounter ensured that any distress that was caused was 'managed' through standard ethical protocols.

Data generated through the biographical narrative (psychosocial) interviews were combined with other qualitative research material from other methods. Rather than look for inner meanings that were unknown to the individual I was interested in finding out about how individuals made sense of their emotional worlds and relational lives, exploring connections *within individual participants' narratives* through different forms of data and presentations of self. These meanings may have been known to a lesser or greater extent by the individual, after all most participants are not trained in analytical techniques and may be more or less self aware, but I did not set out to *interpret* what people had said through sets of theorising that afford external meanings to data, as interview texts. This does not mean that my sociological analysis is likely to be any more or less in tune with how a participant may see themselves and/or how they would like to be seen. 'It is important to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth that sociologists probably often produce analyses which are not congruent with their subjects' own self identifications' (Roseneil 2006). I am however convinced that the richness and scope of data produced and analysed through the psychosocial lens demonstrates the efficacy of the approach and its usefulness in studies of family lives and personal relationships.

### **Telling it like it is?: 'Responsible knowing'**

Psychosocial approaches are still being refined and they do require us to return to wider epistemological issues on the politics of 'knowing'.

Methodological discussion on ethical issues in research practice tends to be

set apart from theoretically-oriented work which is framed in philosophical or epistemological terms. Andrea Doucet and Natasha Mauthner (2003) advocate the bringing together of these two strands, linking ethics, methods, methodologies and epistemologies. In this way, they argue, it is possible to 'know well', 'know responsibly' and attain a high degree of 'epistemic responsibility'. In this last section I would like to suggest that ethical and 'responsible knowing' can be enhanced through methodological and epistemological 'messiness' in family studies research. We do not have to be overwhelmed by the politics of evidence; 'ways of knowing are always already partial, moral and political' (Denzin 2009: 154) and it is important to retain this richness in qualitative inquiry.

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



temptation to sanitise arguments in a way that 'strips negative cases, conflicting viewpoints, contradictions, or ambiguity in our results' (Daly 2007: 259-260).

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

Parents' actions often aimed both to provide emotional rewards for children and to transmit *their* value systems. Parental assessments of risk that looked to 'protect' the child were also designed to legitimize parents' imposition of their rules and moral codes of conduct. Strategies of mutual disclosure and the closeness of the parent–children relationship appeared to be sometimes

oriented around a parent's emotional need and/or designed to advance parental aspirations. Reading through the data again and again, it was clear that *purposeful* parenting strategies and *instrumental* forms of intimacy were commonplace. These practices neither undermined the quality of parents' care nor questioned the overriding picture of 'happy families' that was presented instead 'strategic practices of intimacy' were simply part of the complex picture of family relationships (Gabb 2008). To omit these observations and edit out sections that painted a not so rosy portrait would only serve to delimit understandings of relational life and obscure the materiality of everyday parent–child intimacy.

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

In some ways my research is politically motivated. I want to interrogate ideas of 'good enough parenting' that are being bolstered through abundant mediations of ways to improve parent-child relationships. Social policy and popular commentaries are being mobilised to admonish 'bad parents', stigmatising those who are getting it wrong. These discourses are narrow in scope and shaped through assumptions on class, privilege and choice (Gillies 2006). I contend that if we are to fully understand family processes, how family members relate to one another, then we need to examine multidimensional family life, including parenting strategies and parent-child relationships which are neither physically or emotionally harmful nor altruistic or wholly positive. The gap between conventional understandings of 'good' and 'bad' parenting is enormous and most family practices reside in this hinterland.

I suggest that in some instances the deference to ethical principles in family studies research has led to unnecessarily rigid interpretative strategies that structure how we present family lives. The need to *demonstrate* trust and respect has led researchers to obscure the messiness of lived lives. The perceived need *to be seen to be doing* good ethical practice has meant that troublesome 'realities', and I use that word with considerable caution and a barrage of quote marks, are edited out of accounts of family relationships. The picture painted is seeped in good intentions, but my argument is that this conceals the complexities of lived experience. It also represents a generative research practice that is not motivated solely by researcher integrity.

As researchers, we often uncover uncomfortable 'home truths' both about the social world and individuals' motivations and practices that constitute and produce everyday life. Recently the tendency is to cover over this complex picture of ordinary family life. The determining factors which drive this editorial process are multiple and in some senses contradictory. Some factors derive from the current climate of risk assessment, a response to Western litigation culture that is increasingly shaping ethical protocols. Other factors are political in orientation, intentional or inadvertent responses to external pressures that aim to push a particular agenda and to characterise families in certain ways. Another set of determinants are structured through methodology, for example longitudinal qualitative studies require the researcher to keep participants on board for the duration of the project. Genuine concerns about the impact of publicizing unfavourable material and how research findings can be used to foster myths about different 'kinds' of family can inflect editorial decisions. These factors (and others besides) are in some sense disparate but their individual and combined effect is to over-determine the picture that emerges of contemporary family life.

In this article I call into question the growing preoccupation with ethics in social research, suggesting that taken to the extreme, ethical concerns *could* and in many cases *do* shape the subject of study, 'constituting the very rationale of research' (Hammersley 1999: 18). To preserve anonymity, accounts told to us in the privacy of an interview are carved up, separated from others, repackaged under different names and references to third parties are removed. All of these measures are aimed at honouring confidentiality

agreements between the participant and the researcher, 'protecting' those who have re-presented their lives to us. However one eventual outcome of this protective strategy is that stories of family lives become disjointed; the dissected fragments of personal accounts are shuffled beyond recognition – but at considerable analytical cost.

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

group. Multiple strategies designed to protect participants' anonymity were undertaken throughout.

I am not advocating that we cast aside ethical procedures and ride roughshod over those whose lives are shared with us. What I am suggesting is that we may have overstepped both what is required of us and what participants' reasonably expect. In the *Behind Closed Doors* project everyday parenthood and ordinary experiences and practices of intimacy painted a dynamic and complex picture of family relationships. To restrict the methods we use 'just in case' they recall an upsetting experience or to omit sections that paint a troublesome picture in case we offend an individual or show a family as anything less than 'good enough', delimits understandings of relational life and obscures the materiality of everyday parent–child intimacy. Tying up all the narrative loose ends too tightly shuts down understandings and obscures the temporality of family relationships. To retain the methodological and emotional 'messiness' of relational and everyday lives is neither an ethical shortcut nor incompleteness in family research but represents life as it is lived: contingent, shifting and always moving.<sup>4</sup> Ethics provide the framework for completing research and analysis, they shape how we make sense of relational worlds but they should not restrict our interpretation and/or characterisation of them.

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<sup>1</sup> *Behind Closed Doors* was an ESRC-funded pilot project (RES-000-22-0854).

<sup>2</sup> For a critical engagement with approaches to the analysis of multiple perspectives in family sociology see McCarthy et al McCarthy, J. R., Gillies, V. and Holland, J. (2003).

<sup>3</sup> See *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (2008), (13)4 for critical debate.

<sup>4</sup> See Gabb, J. (forthcoming) for an analysis of methodological and conceptual benefits in retaining 'messiness' in studies of relational life.

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