Interviewing Fathers: Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork

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ABSTRACT   *This paper explores the dilemmas encountered carrying out empirical research using a feminist methodological approach. Specifically, I recount my experiences while undertaking qualitative research, in which I explored the experiences of employed mothers in the UK. At the beginning of my study, I adopted a feminist 'position'. This paper explains how an initial decision to exclude men from the research sample proved more complex than anticipated, and was eventually reversed. The issue of equality between the researcher and participants is discussed and the question of whether the approach of the researcher should change, depending on the gender of the respondents, is considered. It is suggested that the experience of doing fieldwork may be different from the outcomes anticipated from the literature. In this case, the behaviour of male interviewees during the interview was very similar to that of female interviewees. Men were just as co-operative and articulate as women. This was not predicted on the basis of some of the existing literature on woman-to-man interviews. It is suggested that the application of epistemology in the field, especially in relation to woman-to-man interviewing, is complex, but that cross gender interviewing may be beneficial in terms of research outcomes.*

KEYWORDS: Interviewing, mothers, fathers, feminist, dilemmas, fieldwork

> The question of whether or not sociologists should allow their own values and beliefs to affect their research cuts to the heart of a longstanding ... debate.
>
> (Devine & Heath, 1999)

> By listening to women ... we transform the construction of knowledge.
>
> (Easton, 1996, p. 4)

Introduction

Undertaking empirical work in the context of epistemological frameworks can be complex and challenging. Just over ten years ago, Mary Maynard observed that personal or theoretical values may be tested when applied in the field:

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> One particular problem is reconciling the abstract analyses and recommendations made at the epistemological level . . . with the more concrete concerns of method and methodology faced by those carrying out empirical research.
>
> <div align="right">(Maynard, 1994, p. 10)</div>

This issue may present difficulties even for experienced researchers, as Finch (2004) suggests in her consideration of mixed methods and feminist research. Thus, although discussions around the application of feminist methodologies in the field are not new, these questions will, arguably, continue to challenge researchers. Of particular interest in the present article is whether to give 'voice' to men in an area of enquiry that should, on the face of it, give primacy to women's accounts. Specifically, in an exploration of how heterosexual mothers of pre-school children manage their working and domestic lives, should fathers' voices be heard, and what methodological issues arise?

The background to my research on mothers was the sharply increasing trend for women with small children, living in the UK, to maintain continuous employment (Pullinger & Summerfield, 1998). Leading this social change are highly qualified women in professional posts, 76% of whom continue paid work after childbirth (Dex *et al.*, 1998) and of which 71% are living with the father of their child(ren) (Thair & Risdon, 1999). Set in the context of this broad demographic picture, I undertook a qualitative study of highly qualified, employed, married or co-habiting UK mothers with children under five years old (Gatrell, 2005). The aim of the research was to address three key questions: What are the experiences of these career mothers? How might mothers' employment decisions be explained? And how do they and their male partners negotiate their positions in relation to childcare, housework and career? I sought to understand the implications for family practices and to make mother-centred recommendations for employment policy in the UK.

As I commenced my research, I proposed to adopt feminist methodological ideals which reflected 'the values and principles which lie at the heart of the feminist project' (Frances, 2002, p. 52), and which I interpreted as foregrounding women's voices. As a consequence, I made the decision that fathers' voices should be excluded from my empirical research. However, once I began to explore this area of concern, I acknowledged the need to compromise my ideological preferences and include men in the research sample. The conflict of interest between the original aim to 'shatter the silence of women's [voices]' (Graham, 1983, p. 135), and the subsequent decision to interview fathers, provide the focus of this article. In recounting my experiences, I focus on ethical questions regarding the equitable treatment of men and women and the impact on research outcomes of including fathers in the research. I also consider power relations between myself and the participants, and the behaviour of male and female interviewees.

Women's Employment Decisions – Theoretical Debates

Debates on women's paid work are extensive. These include analyses of why women are excluded from senior positions (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004); discussions on the gendered nature and extent of women's employment (Crompton, 1997, 2000); and broad analyses of demographic trends derived from large data sets (Thair & Risdon, 1999; Dex *et al.*, 1998; Macran *et al.*, 1996). Cockburn (2002) has reflected that women's reproductive status makes them a focus for discrimination:

Even if the woman . . . is celibate or childless she is seen and represented as one of the maternal sex. Much of the argument surrounding Equal Opportunities at work circles about the question: can women ever be equal, given their different relation to reproduction?

(Cockburn, 2002, p. 180)

Cockburn's view accords with a confidential survey undertaken by the Institute of Directors (IoD) which revealed that 45% of IoD members would be reluctant to employ any woman aged between sixteen and forty-five because she might become pregnant (Malthouse, 1997). Despite the growing body of literature on women's work, however, it has been argued that there remains a need for further study due to the 'inadequacy of most sociological theory in explaining women's employment decisions and outcomes' (McRae, 2003, p. 592). McRae's view may relate to a discomfort with some of the existing economic debates on women's employment, which suggest that women are less work-oriented than men, and that part-time female employees are less committed to their paid work than full-timers. This approach is associated with Catherine Hakim's work, which informs the policy agenda of influential UK agencies, such as the Institute of Directors (Hakim, 1996a; Malthouse, 1997).

In 1995, Hakim queried statistical claims that female employment was rising (Hakim, 1995). Her argument was challenged by Ginn *et al.*, (1996), who suggested that Hakim had failed to acknowledge the number of women in part-time posts and had also neglected to observe the increase in women's commitment to paid work over a five year period. Hakim responded by asserting that:

the unpalatable truth is that a substantial proportion of women still accept the sexual division of labour which sees homemaking as women's principal activity and income earning as men's principal activity in life. The acceptance of differentiated sex roles underlines fundamental differences between the work orientations, labour market behaviours and life goals of men and women.

(Hakim, 1996b, p. 179)

More recently, Hakim (2000) has argued that women's commitment (or otherwise) to paid work can be explained through Preference Theory. The underlying assumption here is that women have free choice about whether or not to undertake paid work. Hakim argues that this choice is unencumbered by social and economic circumstances [a hypothesis which might be contested by scholars writing about patriarchy, such as Walby (1990)]. Hakim concludes that only 20% of women are work oriented, with 20% home oriented and the remainder treating employment as a 'job' rather than a 'career'. She focuses particularly on mothers, whom she claims will lose interest in paid work once children are born. However, McRae asserts that preference theory: 'fails to take account of the situational logic confronting women' (2003, p. 592) and Crompton (2002) accords with this view. The assumption that mothers are uncommitted to their paid work runs very deep, however, and has been perpetuated by writers like Tooley, who argues that:

there are gender differences in the way men and women respond to domesticity. Many women . . . feel [unhappiness] in being moved away from a sphere that could

be the source of their fulfilment [the home] to a sphere which is clearly not [employment].

(Tooley, 2002, p. 120)

It appeared to me that hypotheses about mothers' low work-orientation failed to correlate with the increasing trend for women to combine motherhood with career. Why would so many mothers choose to maintain continuous employment if their work-orientation was low? This conundrum presented an intellectual puzzle (Mason, 1996) and a desire to understand mothers' commitment to employment was, in part, what motivated me to undertake research in this area.

Methodological Debates and the Position Occupied by the Researcher

Given my intention to approach the research from a 'feminist' perspective it was important to be clear about how I proposed to both interpret and undertake 'feminist research'. Ramazanoglu and Holland argue that the spirit of feminist enquiry is difficult to capture because feminism 'covers a diversity of beliefs, practices and politics … For every generalisation about feminism, it is possible to find feminists who do not fit, or who do not want to fit' (2002, p. 5). Furthermore, as Olesen asserts, the 'context and contours of feminist research are shifting' and 'views of women's lives and the assumptions about their subjectivity, once seen by some as universally homogenous, have been sharpened and differentiated …' (1994, p. 158). Frances, who explores the tensions between feminism as a meta-narrative and a post-modern interpretation of the world, argues that 'there can never be one "true" perspective on justice and value or an holistic feminist account that speaks for all women' (2002, p. 49). However, Frances also contends that feminist enquiry requires researchers to be political; they must identify a position where, if not claiming to understand what is 'true', they can nevertheless argue the need for change. My own understanding of feminist research derived from the views of writers like Finch and Mason (1993), Maynard (1994) and Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994), who suggest that feminist research should relate sociology to practice, policy and decision making, seeking to enhance the situation of women in society, while acknowledging that 'dreams of resistance' (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994, p. 3) might mean different things to different women. Thus, when I began my research, I sought to undertake political feminist research which was 'for, rather than about, women' (Olesen, 1994, p. 169). In adopting this stance, I regarded the voices and the needs of mothers as central to my research. Thus, although I was aware of precedents for including men in research on families (Hochschild, 1997; Smart & Neale, 1999; Duncombe & Marsden, 1995, 2002), I intended, nevertheless, to focus exclusively on mothers.

Initially, my plan was to adopt a Feminist Standpoint Epistemology, which 'gives priority to the voices of the less powerful and the marginalised … women' (Devine & Heath, 1999, p. 28). Feminist Standpoint Epistemology at first appeared attractive because it facilitated a political stance by privileging the experiences of women. The existence (or desirability) of a feminist standpoint has, however, been challenged by feminist scholars (Delamont, 2003a; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Hekman, 2000), since the assumption that the situation of women can be understood through one model of feminist research implies 'an overarching inference as to the nature of women', leading to a failure to understand women's 'fragmented identities' and the problem of 'neglect(ing) alternative

traditions such as those of women of color' (Olesen, 1994, p. 163). While Stanley and Wise (1993, p. 114) have argued for a range of feminist standpoints, which they suggest offers a healthy pluralism, Maynard (1994, p. 20) argues that there are ontological problems involved in Stanley and Wise's position. She warns that the power relations between different groups of women could mean that some women's standpoints are heard at the expense of others. Code argues that: 'recent feminist concentration on differences and specificities makes the possibility of a feminist standpoint both remote and suspect, for it would presuppose an artificial unity in diversity' (1991, p. 317). She argues in favour of taking up a feminist 'position' and suggests that 'positionality ... is a sophisticated elaboration of earlier feminist standpoint theories' (1991, p. 317). Positionality enables the feminist researcher to assume accountability for the position she occupies (enabling her to resist the male, or institutional occupants of other positions) without assuming any ability to speak on behalf of *all* women. Code defines positionality as designating:

> positions that are ... sufficiently stable to permit active political involvement. Positions are one loci for active construction of meaning – that is neither ... discovered nor imposed but constructed – and foci for socio-political change. [Positionality] creates a political space for reinterpreting and engaging critically with the forms of authority and expertise that circumscribe women's control over their lives.
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> (Code, 1991, p. 180)

Code cites the example of a feminist researcher campaigning for better childcare facilities, and suggests that positionality would assist this woman in her active political involvement while at the same time 'allowing for social and political critique, remapping, renegotiation' (Code, 1991, p. 180). Positionality appeared to offer the possibility of being political through research without the presumption that other women would necessarily agree with the account of the social world which this produced.

As I designed my study, therefore, I moved away from a feminist standpoint but adopted a position based on the idea that politics and feminist research were inseparable, that knowledge was situated and subjective; and that I might relate women's accounts of their experiences without claiming that my construction of meaning was in some way *their* construction of meaning. This enabled me to retain the perspective that feminist theory (and research) may legitimately be related to policy, without the pretence that it was possible, or desirable, to generalise the situation of mothers. Initially, I did not anticipate the need to interview fathers as part of my social and political critique because I considered the interests of professional males to be already well served in the literature on the sociology of work [an opinion also shared by Grint (1998)]. Like Delamont (2003a, 2003b), I felt that written outcomes which focused on women might redress the balance and, on this basis, it was decided that men would be excluded from the study. However, as I developed my research design, it became evident that this intention might have to change if I were answer my research question and make recommendations for policy.

A Research Dilemma – Interviewing Fathers

During the early stages of my research, I discovered, via two formal presentations, that my chosen topic and the decision to interview only women were perceived by some men as

controversial. The first presentation was to an interdisciplinary group of twenty research students. I explained to the group that men would be excluded from my research sample because my thesis was 'mother-centred' and, as such, would explore the views of women, but not men. This provoked an angry response from the men in the room. At the second event – a training course for new academics – the discussion provoked a similar reaction, one participant going so far as to suggest that: 'Women with babies shouldn't be at work anyway, they should be at home, breastfeeding'. Reactions such as these only served to harden my resolve and during the first year of the study I refused to listen to any suggestion that I might compromise my ideals, and continued with the plan to interview only women.

Soon after, however, I began to consider my research topic from a broader angle and it became clear to me that I could not effectively explore the demographic shift towards career motherhood and employment unless the views of fathers, as well as mothers, were considered – even if this did conflict with my original aim of listening only to the voices of women. I was drawn to this conclusion following further methodological reflection. Jennifer Mason's *Qualitative Researching* (1996) was particularly useful because it helped me to articulate 'what is the essence of the enquiry?' – arguably one of the most challenging parts of the research process (Mason, 1996, p. 10). While contemplating what Mason describes as 'Difficult Questions' a methodological issue arose which – although it did not suit my personal values – became difficult to ignore. Although I had explicitly chosen to foreground the voices and needs of career mothers, the demographics showed that this group would probably be living with the fathers of their (youngest) children (Thair & Risdon, 1999). As a consequence of this, in order to understand mothers' experiences I had identified the need to explore the power relations between mothers and fathers: how they negotiated relative positions and responsibilities and how they settled the allocation of resources. Thus, although this was in contrast to what I had set out to do initially, it seemed that the views of the men who were married to/co-habiting with the career women under consideration would be required if the area of concern was to be understood fully. I therefore concluded that I should, after all, include fathers in the research sample. My feelings, on realising that there were 'questions that I actually could not answer' (Finch, 2004, p. 63) without interviewing men were similar to those described by Finch (2004) when she realised that her research on kinship required a quantitative approach. Finch found this 'shocking' because it challenged her understanding of 'feminist research'. Like Finch, I feared there may be an uneasy relationship between the practical requirements of the research design and the political ideals of the feminist project (Frances, 2002).

Interestingly, Stanley and Wise argue that:

> essential though research specifically on women is, feminist research ... must not become confined to this [but] ... must be concerned with all aspects of social reality and all participants in it ... any analysis of women's oppression must involve research on the part played by men in this.
>
> (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p. 31)

Thus, although I felt concerned about introducing fathers into research which was intended to benefit mothers, I hoped that I could still retain the goal of designing research '*for* women – in order to provide for women the explanations of social phenomena that they want and need' (Harding, 1987, p. 8, original emphasis). The decision to include men,

however, precipitated my next dilemma – how to treat male research participants in a feminist study of motherhood which had originally set out to privilege the female voice?

Research Methods

Given that quantitative analyses of women's employment already existed, I wished to explore the attitudes and feelings of participants and a qualitative approach (in my case in-depth interviews) was the obvious route to choose. With regard to research methods, earlier arguments put forward by some feminists (e.g. Oakley, 1981) that quantitative research represented a 'masculinist way of knowing' (Maynard, 1994, p. 11) are acknowledged, as is the more recent reconsideration of the quantitative versus qualitative debate (Finch, 2004; Oakley, 1998, 2000), with some feminist researchers combining both quantitative and qualitative methods (Finch & Mason, 1993; Holland & Ramazonaglu, 1994). My decision to undertake qualitative research related less to its relationship with feminism, and more to the idea of gaining understanding by developing research that was located in 'two dimensions' (Finch, 2004, p. 64), the existing demographic research providing me with the broad, quantitative context in which I could set my own in-depth qualitative study.

Sampling Framework

The fieldwork for my research spanned two and a half years and I interviewed twenty mothers and eighteen fathers. Demographic research on career mothers with pre-school children had already identified the characteristics of women most likely to maintain continuous employment after childbirth. Members of this group were qualified at least to degree level and working in the 'higher occupations' (Macran *et al.*, 1996, p. 275). They were also likely to be living with the father of the child. I decided that the inclusion criteria for women should be based on the picture provided by existing quantitative data – mothers should have at least one pre-school child and must be married/co-habiting with the father at the time of the interview. They must hold a first degree as a minimum qualification and must be employed in a professional capacity. My definition of 'profession' was taken from the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC, 1991). Parents who took part were recruited through snowballing so that no obvious connection could be made between themselves and their workplace. Couples were located in varying geographical areas across the UK including London, Manchester, Liverpool, Greater Manchester, Durham, Essex and Cheshire. This, and the fact that most interviewees had no direct connection with me, served to protect their anonymity. In every case the 'gatekeeper' for the research was the mother, and the father was approached only after she had been interviewed.

The Researcher and the Researched – Equal Treatment for All?

Code (1991) advises that methodologies always raise ethical and political questions and argues that researchers must address these as their enquiry develops. Before the decision to include men in the sample, I had adopted four ethical principles which seemed appropriate for research dealing with intimate matters such as relationships and childbirth. These were to be applied at each stage of the research and shared with participants so that boundaries were defined at the outset. The principles comprised: autonomy (informed consent), non-maleficence (doing no harm), beneficence (doing good), and justice

(Holloway & Wheeler, 1996, p. 39). In relation to 'justice', I had stated that all research participants would be treated alike and that all accounts would be respected as equally valid.

Coffey (1999) emphasises the need to explore the relationship between the self and fieldwork, and power differentials between researchers and the researched. She stresses the requirement for researchers to account for their physical presence in the field. As a woman, it seemed important to consider my position in relation both to cross-gender, and single sex interviewing. This was an interesting exercise, since writers on feminist research approach interviewing men and women from different stances. Writers on women researching women have long been concerned with issues of dominance between researcher and participant, and many construct the researcher as occupying the stronger position. Oakley (1981), Finch (1993), and Reinharz (1992) have argued that female researchers should establish rapport, and if possible reciprocity, with the women they are interviewing because this may help to empower participants. Chandler (1990), however, contends that rapport may be difficult to achieve because human relationships are complex. She reasons that single sex interviews are no guarantee of instant empathy. In accordance with Chandler's view, Edwards (1990) and Riessman (1987) argue that issues of race and class can impede understanding and the construction of meaning in qualitative interviews where women interview women. These writers contend that cultural differences may create barriers. An extensive literature exists which challenges the myth that 'women' are a homogenous group (e.g. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Jackson & Jones, 1998; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2000) and researchers are warned against attempting to universalise experience.

Concerns about the vulnerability of interviewees are less apparent in feminist discussions about women interviewing men, where female researchers are often conceived as the weaker party and men may be portrayed as unhelpful and potentially violent. McKee and O'Brien (1983) relate experiences where their safety was put at risk by the men they interviewed, and warn that in woman-to-man interviews 'The potential for sexual violation is omnipresent . . . in individual interactions' (p. 157). Lee (1997) also raises concerns about female 'interviewer vulnerability' and advocates: 'heightened concern . . . given the evidence of the frequency of men's sexual violence against women' (p. 555). Even where there appears to be no physical threat, it may be assumed that men will have the 'upper hand' when interviews are conducted by women: '. . . reticence to make demands on husbands reflects a general reluctance to study people of greater social status or power than the [female] interviewer, a phenomenon known as studying up. When feminists . . . research men . . . they are likely to demand less' (Reinharz, 1992, p. 42). Female researchers are warned that male interviewees are likely either to respond to them with aggression, or to be unforthcoming and repressed. For example, Lee (1997) elicited angry and challenging responses from some male interviewees, while McKee and O'Brien (1983, p. 153) describe men as incapable of expressing emotion. In their work on the gender division of emotion in households, Duncombe and Marsden (1993) also depict men as unable or unwilling to disclose feelings, not only in interview situations, but in relationships in general. Interestingly, not all discussions about cross-gender interviewing report experiences as problematic as those encountered by Lee (1997). Williams and Heikes (1993, p. 288) assert that male participants may take into account the gendered context of an interview. Some male interviewees are careful about how they present views which could be seen as 'hostile and sexist', trying to express themselves diplomatically so as not to cause offence.

This conflicting advice and my ethical resolve of achieving justice for all participants raised questions about the position of men in my research, and left me with a dilemma.

While in some respects I agreed with the cautious approach adopted by Lee (1997), the concept of treating participants differently depending on their gender raised ethical questions. Lee acknowledges this as an issue. She interviewed male respondents in a public setting and in doing so, worried that:

> an emphasis on interviewer vulnerability sits very uneasily alongside the feminist interviewer's ethical responsibilities to interviewees. For while interviewing a man in his own home … may place women interviewers in potentially dangerous situations, conducting interviews in public places raises difficulties for male interviewees who may not want their experiences to be overheard.
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> (Lee, 1997, p. 563)

While I had set out with the idea of privileging mothers' voices, this had been on the basis that I intended to interview only women. Any suggestion that participants should be treated differently depending on their gender seemed incompatible with my own ethical obligations. I did not feel that I could uphold the principle of justice if I interviewed men and women under different circumstances, or if I approached men with the assumption that they would be incapable of articulating their feelings. Thus, although I took basic safety precautions (by giving contact details to a family member in a sealed envelope), I interviewed everyone under similar conditions and began with the assumption that all interviewees intended to be helpful and co-operative.

Interviewing Men and Women

During the interviews, fathers were offered the same opportunity as mothers to explore feelings about the combining of motherhood and career. This did not mean that I tried to hide my own beliefs. I explained to all participants that my research was informed by a feminist position, that it was mother-centred and that I intended to make recommendations for policy in the hope of improving the situation for career mothers. In formulating the interview structure, I felt it important to allow mothers and fathers to define their experiences in their own way. The interviews therefore included a series of themes, but the structure was flexible and questions were open-ended. Reinharz (1992, p. 21) has suggested that this approach is consistent with 'more egalitarian research methods' which assist the researcher in 'avoiding control over others' (p. 20). I questioned this assertion once I began the interviews because, although this had not been my intention at the outset, I found that male and female respondents consistently allowed me to set the agenda for discussion and at no point did I feel that I was 'studying up' (Reinharz, 1992, p. 42). I discovered that once I had defined a topic area, silence on my part was a powerful means of 'maximising discovery and description' (Reinharz, 1992, p. 18). As Silverman suggests, it may be 'naive to assume that open-ended or non-directive interviewing is not in itself a form of social control which shapes what people say. For instance . . . the passivity of the interviewer can create an extremely powerful constraint on the interviewee to talk' (1993, p. 96). Like Lee, I found that interviewees were keen to 'be listened to non-judgementally, without interruption and with interest' (1997, p. 54) regardless of their gender. They did not appear to want 'reciprocity of information' (Lee, 1997, p. 561), but preferred to preserve the interview as space to talk about their own issues. One man said: 'I am just so grateful for the opportunity to get things off my chest'. Fathers and mothers all seemed keen to talk about their experiences and nobody seemed

embarrassed or constrained about being emotional. All interviews expressed feelings of love, jealousy and anger and most spoke at length regarding the joys and frustrations involved in new (especially first) births. This is in contrast to the experiences of Duncombe and Marsden (1993) and McKee and O'Brien (1983). Given the uncomfortable experiences described by Lee (1997) and the terrifying story of a sexual attack on a researcher, described by Coffey (1999, p. 93), it seems important to note that none of the interviewees said or did anything that was threatening. Both women and men expressed views that could have been regarded as contentious and tried to present these in such a way that I would not be offended (as noted by Williams & Heikes, 1993). All participants took trouble to ensure that I felt safe and at ease, for example offering generous refreshments, leaving office doors ajar and walking with me to my car at the end of interviews.

Research Findings

Analysis of the research data identified four main issues which were highlighted when respondents recounted their experiences of marriage/co-habitation, employment and raising children. In relation to two of the issues (paid work and housework), the experiences of participants accorded with existing research on parenting and paid work. Firstly, in keeping with reports by the Equal Opportunities Commission (2005), mothers who displayed any manifestation of their maternity at work (for example by changing working practices) experienced discrimination. 'Family Friendly' policies were difficult to access and mothers who utilised such policies were the subject of disapproval.

Secondly, and in common with other studies on women and domestic labour (Delphy & Leonard, 1992; Gregson & Lowe, 1994; Dryden, 1999), all but one mother found herself accountable for the majority of domestic chores. This was the case no matter how senior mothers were, or how many hours paid work they undertook. Those who were able to afford it outsourced certain domestic tasks, but the responsibility for organising and funding housework remained theirs. The analysis of mothers' and fathers' accounts allowed for a consideration of both perspectives and suggested that, in accordance with the literature (e.g. Delphy & Leonard, 1992), domestic labour continued to be a female responsibility, many men regarding household chores as a thankless task (and therefore the province of women). Some writers on women's labour have argued that women over-report men's contribution to household and childcare labour (e.g. Dryden, 1999). However, in my interviews (perhaps because each partner knew that I intended to interview the other), this did not appear to be the case. Fathers' and mothers' accounts regarding domestic labour were similar and couples recognised the tensions caused by fathers' lack of contribution. One mother commented: 'I feel I am dragging my husband like a donkey to get him to take responsibility [for housework]'. Another mother said: 'It makes me very cross because I have to do everything and he does nothing'. Fathers, while they recognised that the division of domestic labour might be unfair, demonstrated little enthusiasm about doing more. One father explained: 'Domestic stuff? Oh, well, I'm no good at washing and ironing and I'm hopeless at washing up. I hate the pans and the grease'. Some men openly resented their wives/partners' refusal to undertake particular tasks, such as the ironing of shirts. One father explained: 'Occasionally there is conflict and I might get a bit annoyed that a shirt of mine hasn't been ironed. I mean, I'm not saying she has *got* to iron it, just that I would have *liked* her to iron it'.

Two of the areas highlighted by respondents indicated differences from existing research. The first of these related to mothers' social identification with their employment. All mothers

who took part in the research (whether working full-time or fractionally) exhibited high work-orientation. Mothers regarded careers as an important part of their social identity, and several made comments along the lines of: 'My work is part of who I am'. Mothers were ambitious and determined and, while they were keen to spend quality time with their children, were also frustrated if they believed that their career progression was blocked by their maternal status. This attitude contrasts with the arguments put forward by Hakim (1996a, 2000) and Tooley (2002) that mothers are often unambitious, and uncommitted to their paid work. Some mothers felt guilty about their high work-orientation because they worried that this might compromise their abilities as mothers. Fathers, on the other hand, did not regard mothers' work-orientation as detrimental to their maternal capabilities and most men were cognisant of, and attracted by their partner/wife's work orientation.

A further discovery which was at variance with existing research on parenting and marriage was that fathers demonstrated a higher level of involvement with children than might have been anticipated. Backett (1987) and Ribbens (1994) have argued that, within marriage/co-habitation, fathers are prepared to accept a secondary role in children's lives and that paternal/child relationships are mediated by mothers. In my study, by contrast, all but one father was keen to develop a direct relationship with his children. Fathers recognised that co-caring was important in establishing paternal entitlements *within* marriage/co-habitation and regarded children as central to personal fulfilment. For this reason, most fathers strove to negotiate an involved role from the outset and enjoyed doing baths, bedtimes and feeding. Five men had made the specific decision to 'downshift' their careers so that they could co-care for their children. These fathers had experienced discrimination in the workplace because they were open about their parenting responsibilities and their desire to change working practices. This was not something I had anticipated because I had assumed that that discrimination was likely to be experienced only by mothers. In relation to paternal involvement with children, some mothers argued that sharing parental responsibility for children was advantageous because it facilitated maternal time away from children in order to pursue careers. However, in keeping with Maushart's (2002) fear that increased father–child contact within marriage might disadvantage mothers, other women were conscious of the situational and powerful position they held as mothers within the marriage/relationship, and resisted paternal pressure to relinquish this. Others criticised fathers for wishing to 'share' childcare while refusing to undertake associated chores such as packing lunch boxes and ironing which did not involve direct contact with children.

Had I interviewed only mothers I may have failed to observe fathers' direct involvement with children because in the act of asking mothers to represent the views of male partners I may have unintentionally constructed women as continuing to mediate the father/child relationship. I may also have underestimated the complexity of the paternal construction of 'involved' fathering, which included direct father/child contact but which did not extend to dividing child-related domestic labour.

Conclusions

This paper has been concerned with the complexities of trying to apply a feminist 'position', a concept with a political dimension, to an empirical study. While accepting that researchers 'will inevitably (whether consciously or otherwise) bring their own values to bear on [their] research' (Devine & Heath, 1999, p. 27) my own beliefs about positionality and the need to privilege women's voices, were at times in conflict with what

seemed to be the best way of exploring the area of concern. The realisation that there were 'questions that I actually could not answer' (Finch, 2004, p. 63) unless I interviewed men, persuaded me to include fathers in my research sample. This was contrary to my original aim of listening only to mothers' voices. Having made the decision to include men, I felt obliged, without trying to hide my own political agenda, to conduct both data collection and analysis using the same approach for all participants. Additionally, I discovered that my intention to adopt an egalitarian, feminist approach to interviewing, so as to minimise power differentials between researcher and the researched, was more complex than I had anticipated. If Silverman's (1993) views are to be taken into account, my interviews with both fathers and mothers could, in practice, have been regarded in a distinctly 'directive' light. Interestingly, having made the decision to include fathers in my research sample, I noticed surprisingly little difference between interviews with male and female respondents. Notably, my interviews with men did not correspond with the frightening and unpleasant experiences recounted by Lee (1997), Scott (1984) or Coffey (1999). Both men and women were willing and able to articulate their feelings and all interviewees were thoughtful and courteous. Nobody made reference to my personal appearance, either explicitly or by inference, and nobody harassed or threatened me. Finally, in disseminating and reporting the research, my explicit adoption of a feminist 'position' at the outset was important because this enabled me to focus on mothering without feeling that I had deceived or exploited fathers during the research and its subsequent dissemination.

As Stanley and Wise (2003, p. 9) suggest, it may be difficult to relate epistemology and methodology to 'everyday lives and experiences'. I am still questioning whether the decision to apply a feminist methodological approach to the voices of male, as well as female participants, may compromise feminist ideals. As originally planned, I did produce a research monograph which highlights the issues faced by mothers trying to combine childrearing with career, and makes recommendations for policy to improve the situation for this group of women (Gatrell, 2005). The research findings were more rounded as a result of including both partners and arguably, in the context of my research, it was necessary to accept some form of compromise. However, for me, the application of a research methodology developed to 'shatter the silence of women' (Graham, 1983), to the voices of men, remains an issue. So does the question of whether to approach woman-to-man research in the same manner as woman-to-woman research. Judging by the results of my research, it would be tempting to suggest that a more open approach towards male interviewees [than, for instance the methods adopted by Lee (1997)] might elicit a more co-operative response in return. However, the need to offer male interviewees an environment in which they feel comfortable to talk, and the decision about whether to treat them in the same manner as woman-to-woman interviews must be off-set against the need to be cognisant of one's own safety. The concerns expressed by Lee (1997) and Coffey (1999) must be taken seriously.

In conclusion, I have asserted that trying to apply methodologies with a personal/political dimension, in an empirical context, may produce unanticipated research dilemmas, even for experienced researchers. Although there are many texts available on feminist and qualitative researching, it is suggested that new research throws up new problems for which there may not be a generic solution. Thus, the empirical researcher, no matter how well prepared, may at some point be required to enter territories which she had not sought to explore (such as interviewing men), and which may appear to be less well charted then expected. This may mean that likely outcomes (such as how male

interviewees will react, or what difference their inclusion will make to research findings) are hard to predict.

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