Methodological issues in child and family research

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Methodologies are shaped in the context of epistemologies and theoretical understandings and by critiques of these lenses (for childhood see Corsaro 2005; Prout and James 1990). I will begin here.

Political context

For the kinds of knowledge we seek to create inform the kinds of methods we use. Social science does not occur in a political vacuum but is shaped by wider ideological and structural forces. As Pertti Alasuutari and I have written in the Introduction to our new Handbook of Social Research Methods to be published in 2008, 'Social science research not only speaks to particular social conditions, it reflects the social conditions of a society and the theories that dominate at the time. Because there is no unidirectional progress in social and societal development, the theoretical and methodological apparatus available to social scientists change therefore as they too are shaped by historical, structural and cultural contexts.' (Alasuutari, Brannen and Bickman in press)

Family studies in the 1970s and 1980s and later childhood studies have been driven by a strong political orientation that arises from the desire to change the lives of oppressed groups. Methodologies were shaped by the political urgency to find ways of "giving voice" to those in positions of dependency whose agency and access to resources are curtailed. However it is not only marginalised groups to whom research has been required to become more accountable. Social science research is now required to serve those we term users. Such changes have occurred in the context of the growing pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas, in particular increased accountability in public

expenditure. Public policy decisions are required to be grounded in evidence-based, scientifically-validated research. This pressure to be useful may be equally influential in shifting what and how social scientists study the social world as are the influences of epistemologies and theories. Similarly, the drive towards economic competitiveness creates an impetus for the advancement of methodology and the promotion of methodological innovation, a phenomenon we are seeing in the UK as the research council seeks investment particularly in quantitative methods in order to catch up with the role model of the US.

This requirement towards 'scientific' knowledge production means speaking in a number of different tongues not only those of particular social science disciplines. Arguably, it has led to a de-emphaisis upon disciplines and to a reduction of methodology to method and technique. Such concerns with method, communication and engagement may distract from addressing theoretical issues and from questioning whose interests research serves and for what?

Theoretical lenses

To turn first to childhood, in a review essay published in the journal *Sociology* in 1994 Margaret O'Brien and I reflected on the emerging sociology of childhood, in particular the ground breaking work of Jens Qvortrup and colleagues (1994). We set out three conceptual and overlapping lenses for understanding children's lives: institutionalisation, familialisation, individualisation and life course perspectives (Brannen and O'Brien 1994). These lenses are not new and may be applied equally to family studies. These conceptual lenses are in part ideological suggesting how childhood and family life ought to be governed.

1. A*ge, developmental lifespan and the life course* have long been ways of understanding the business of families and childhood. Sociologists of childhood

have been at the forefront inarguing that such notions have rendered children's own agency invisible. By focussing on children as becomings they failed to understand children as beings in the here and now and to understand as having collective interests. Family sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s focussed on nuclear families as the norm and have been criticised for failing to comprehend the changing and diverse life course trajectories of households and their members.

2. Notions of *institutionalisation* have been used to investigate the (growing) reach of institutions settings into the lives of children and young people. Institutionalisation has alerted us to the compartmentalisation of children and young people into separate and exclusive spheres set apart from the adult world, though in many respects aping it and cutting into the phase of adulthood. Within family studies the concept of the professionalisation of parenting and family life represents a similar concept. Experts and the state have been shown to exercise surveillance over family life while increasingly constructing parents as experts.

3. *Familialisation* has been a central concept in both the study of child and family research. Family socialisation theory has been criticised by childhood researchers for constructing children as pre-social passive objects requiring adult socialisation (Alanen 1998; Corsaro 2005). Within this frame parents are not only providers of material and economic resources but also cultural resources. They are also moral arbiters who exercise control over children (inside and outside the home) and increasingly seen as having responsibility for their educational progress.

4. Theories of *agency and individualisation* have been prominently deployed in the study of youth, family life, childhood and more generally (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim). But discourses of democratisation and 'individual rights' go back a long way. Within families, western models of parenting have long emphasised

> the need for individuality and for the means for a child to develop an identity of its own. Central to current conceptualisations of agency and individualisation is reflexivity – the ability of individuals to reflect upon the self and their situations, actions and decisions – and concepts of identity. Such concepts have been truly revolutionary in the ways in which we as social scientists think about children. On the other hand, individualisation theory has been severely criticised in the recognition that the opportunities for choice remain constrained by structural forces of gender, class and ethnicity (e.g. Brannen and Nilsen 2002, 2006; Smart 2007).

I do not want to argue that there is a neat fit between epistemology, theoretical lenses, political and policy forces and the methods and strategies that we as researchers employ. On the other hand, it does seem to be the case that the conceptualisation of children as agents, as being an important interest group in society does impact directly upon the way research with children has been conducted. Thus Qvortrup in the 1990s sought in his statistical analysis to shift the focal point to children's share of economic resources, taking the child as a unit of analysis rather than the family/ household. Ann Solberg back in the 1980s was a pioneer in the way she carried out a study of children as workers in questioning ideas about age.

The neglect of children's agency is reflected in research procedures. In many studies children are never asked for their informed consent; researchers are content to negotiate with gatekeepers - heads, teachers and parents. For example, they typically investigate children's educational progress or role in family life through the reports of adults. In much the same way it was once commonplace for researchers to approach mothers as the spokespersons for family life rather than trying to study other relevant family members. Many researchers still see children by virtue of their 'age' as unreliable rapporteurs of family life. Many researchers prefer hard outcomes measures derived

from standardised tests and observations. According to normative developmental life span ideas children lack the necessary competences to be actively involved in research. I am sure you can think of many more examples. Only in the recent decade have more sensitive approaches been employed to take account of the child or young person's own views and experiences.

I propose now to devote the remainder of my time to discussing two contrasting methodological strategies.

Participatory approaches

Participatory methods are part of a more general trend in the social sciences in which research knowledge is understood and criticized as a means of exercising power over those studied (Hammersley in press). The rationale for participatory methods is to create social change by giving a voice to the disadvantaged and disempowered, as in the case of feminism in the 1970s. This approach has arisen out of a particular kind of politics (see for example the work of Paulo Freire), in which the purpose of research is emancipatory and transformative. The point here is both to change the power relations between researcher and researched and to create change in the way society thinks about the issues.

In this approach decisions about who or what to research, as well as about research method, are made jointly with the people being studied. These ideas go back the action research movement. They were influential among feminists, and are also currently very influential in the study of children and young people (see for example Reason and Bradbury 2001; MacNaughton and Smith 2005).

The grounds for participatory methods with children are varied

1. Participatory methods are part of the theoretical quest to see childhood as a socially constructed domain (James et al 1998) and to see children as social subjects (Christensen and James 2000; Mayall 2002).

2. They redress power inequalities between the adult and child in the research process.

3. Children are seen as *experts on* their childhood and so participatory methods provide much greater insight into childhood than do traditional methods (see for example Alderson 2001).

3. Participatory methods benefit the individuals who take part: '"Doing research helps children (perhaps disadvantaged ones especially) to gain more skills, confidence and possibly determination to overcome their disadvantages than adult researchers working on their behalf could give them." (Alderson 2001: 151).

5. Participatory methods generate the 'true' voice of the child.

Participatory methods embrace different models. In model I, the aim is to create *collaborative knowledge* that is produced and owned by children. In model 2, researchers take the view that researchers can *learn* from children (Thorne 1993) of whatever age and that their activities, interests, beliefs and experiences are worthy of being listened to and have to be respected. However, whichever model is chosen, the research strategy is researcher led and the decision to adopt a model is usually a researcher decision.

These models have different implications. The model (1) of knowledge as collaboration has implications for the *value* given to research knowledge as compared with lay knowledge. Model 2 (that researchers learn from children) refers to a *hermeneutic* standpoint - understanding children's own worlds through their own eyes. The latter model stops short at the analysis phase of research. It does not extend to prioritizing the

actors' voices over those of the researchers. Rather knowledge generation takes place through a bottom up approach in which the researcher seek concepts that best fit children's situations and experiences (Nilsen 2005). The role of researcher as analyst remains important.

In a study I carried out on children's concepts of care and their experiences of family life we only went so far down the participatory route. In the fieldwork we employed a number of different methods that would actively engage children: questionnaires, vignettes, genealogies, maps of significant others in order to counteract some of the imbalance of power inherent in a one to one interview between adult and child and to gain insight into children's understandings of their lives. We created meaningful ways of seeking children's informed consent, for example helping children to practice saying no if they did not want to answer a specific question and so on (Brannen et al 2000). However we did to some extent adopt a participatory approach in the dissemination phase of the study (Brannen 2002). We went back to one of the schools where we had found some of our informants. We presented the research findings to a group of children in the same age grade as took part in the original study and ask them to comment on the findings. Moreover we sought their permission to video their commentaries on the research with a view to presenting the video to practitioners and policymakers in the dissemination of the research. As the project developed it became clear that one of the main aims of the work was to demonstrate the children's expertise and competence as commentators on research as well as on family life, the original focus of the study. The video made an impact on adult audiences and displayed graphically children's competence to conduct themselves in a public setting (making a video). The issue and one of our original concerns - how far these children's responses supported our original interpretation of the data, which they largely did - became very much a secondary issue. On the other hand, this approach had little influence upon

children's own exercise of agency. Notably the school said there was no time to enable us to show the video to the children.

One critique of the participatory approach in general is not simply that it can put the researcher out of business but that it relegates research knowledge to a relativist position in which 'multiple conceptions of or discourses about the world' are given equal value (Hammersley in press). We need to be sceptical about claiming certainty for our research findings while also not going to so far as to claim that findings are all equally likely to be false. As Harding (1991) has put the matter, we should not give up on telling 'less false stories' . We should take care in making judgments about the interpretations we place on our data not to make them 'solely according to whether or not they are validated by our own cultural communities.' (Hammersley in press). So I would agree with Hammersley that 'Scientific validity is not the same as cultural acceptability. ' (ibid.)

Multi- strategies in studying family life

A second set of methodological strategies that contrast with participatory approaches focuses not on individuals and collectivities of individuals or classes but seeks understanding of interacting social groups and their practices. My focus now is on families and children as consisting in ties that are fluid, temporal, and spatially located. The current theoretical emphasis in family studies has changed towards a relational and negotiative approach that stresses the chosen nature of family ties (Morgan 1996). One cannot easily apply participatory as emancipatory methods to the study of families without recognizing that families are composed of different interests and are differentiated by power relations. To explore relationships as complex sets of relationships and practices it is necessary to focus on all the different actors who participate in family life. No single perspective alone suffices. Family life cannot easily be studied directly. We may choose from multiple methods including documents,

individual interviews, group interviews, observations, diaries and questionnaires, while some researchers are incorporating visual methods and are thinking of ways of understanding multi sensory aspects of family and personal life. We may draw upon multiple investigators, and multiple informants. Within the category of interviews we have to decide what interview approach to go for - directive or nondirective, structured questions, narrative questions or an unstructured life stories. These are the grist to the methodological mill. Most of these strategies are not new but their application needs revisiting given the current fashion to focus on individual voice and agency. In contrast to participatory approaches, they inevitably place considerable demands upon the research analyst.

In accordance with the popularity of a constructionist perspective in this field, many methodological discussions focus on interpreting informants' accounts as products of the research process. While this is undoubtedly important, it is also in my view part of our job to understand family life as *lived realities* as experienced by each family member and across time – family ties persist even if often only in our heads. The methodological challenges tend to focus not only on issues of interpretation of data (epistemology) but also on the social context and opportunity structures (a realist ontology).

I will now focus on an example from my own research in which we interviewed up to eight family members in a four generation family and discuss the methodological procedures we used. The study focussed on time – on change and continuity over the generations and the ways that family members negotiated work and care over the life course of each member and on the resources given and received intergenerationally (Brannen et al 2004).

The oldest great grandparent generation was born in the interwar period - between 1911 and 1921

The middle or grandparent generation was born around and just after World War II – 1940 and 1948

The parent generation with young children was born between 1965 and 1975 and grew up in the neoliberal policies of the Thatcher and post Thatcher years

In the analysis we identified three challenges:

(a) how to bring into our analysis the influence of historical context on their life experiences and world views;

(b) how to apply a life course approach - the study covered three generations currently occupying the statuses of great grandparents, grandparents, adult children, parents;

(c) how to take account of family members' interpretations and in particular the current time frames and perspectives they adopted in the course of a long interview.

We used multiple informants, multiple investigators (4) and interviews that encompassed different approaches. We employed a biographic-interpretive method involving an analytic separation of the 'lived life' from the 'told story'. Our interviewing approach drew on a particular biographical narrative approach (Wengraf, 2001). This we adapted dividing it into three parts. In the first, respondents were invited to give an account of their lives from childhood onwards, with a minimum of guidance and intervention from the interviewer. This provided an opportunity for the respondent to present his or her own *gestalt.* In the second part, the interviewer invited the respondent to elaborate on salient events and experiences that had figured in the initial narrative. Finally,

using a more traditional semi-structured approach; we posed additional questions relating to the specific foci of the study. Interviews lasted on average three hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The analysis proceeded through three stages, working from the individual level (of researcher with the individual's interview material), to the kin group level involving a team discussion of the family), and culminating in a comparison of the case study kin groups, with one researcher taking responsibility for a particular theme of the analysis.[1]

(a) One challenge was to fill in the *historical context*. It is easy to study a particular generation ahistorically. However our families spanned the twentieth century. In that time the conditions of material life had changed dramatically as fewer workers were employed in manual occupations. Educational opportunities, especially for women, had opened up dramatically. The postwar period saw more upward social mobility than ever before in Britain. Over the last decade or so social mobility has flattened off even with the significant increase in rates of staying on at school after 16 for what we call the current generation of parents (Blanden et al 2002).

The great grandparent generation saw the arrival of state pensions, making them the first mass generation to be able to pass on money to younger generations (Kohli 2004); even if the amounts were small, this gave them a source of material power historically unprecedented in many families. The grandparents, born in the post war period, grew up by contrast in a climate of economic certainty - near full *male* employment, and

[1] In the first stage, each team member was responsible for writing a summary (up to 10 pages) of each interview she or he had conducted. First, after the interview, the researcher wrote up their recollection and impressions of the interview. Then a detailed summary was written when the transcript became available; the material was organised under a number of specified themes and a 'life history chronology'. Second, each of the four team members was responsible for carrying out several analyses at the kin group level for three of the 12 families (up to 20 pages) in which cross-generational comparisons were made in each family. These first two stages have provided a basis for building the final analysis in which we compared the intergenerational kin groups according to the analyses generated in phase 2 , working with particular themes such as fatherhood .

ideas about maternal attachment that served to support the British government's need to create jobs for men after their return from war, relegating women to the home. The youngest generation - new parents were brought up in the neo liberalism of the Thatcher years and the succession.

By filling in the historical context we were alerted to what is *taken for granted* in people's accounts, forgotten or overlaid by interpretations given in the interview that pertained to their current values and perceptions. If we address ourselves only to a one-dimensional empirical reality and do not listen to the underlying 'silent narratives', we are indeed ignoring a key sociological resource - 'the sociological imagination' (Brannen and Nilsen 2005). Understanding life stories as 'pockets of history' is difficult not least because informants do not necessarily refer to historical context and because they are concerned discursively to knit their narratives about the past with their present discourses (Nielsen 2003). Practical strategies that helped us to do this included:

- Employing a historian on the team
- Creating time lines of historical events and relating these to informants' own chronologies
- Bringing these perspectives to bear through a structural approach as well as focusing on informants' own interpretations of their lives:

(b) We also unpicked accounts of family life in relation to a particular *life course phase and each informant's positioning in the generational order.* In recounting the stories of their lives informants typically moved between different life course phases (and historical perspectives) that shaped the form of their stories. Great grandmothers for example looked back from the vantage point of a late life course phase. Their long lives and their experience of considerable social change over their lives provided them with a great number of interpretative contexts (Nielsen 2003). In their relationships to their

great grandchildren they were both objectively and subjectively distant from them: because of the presence of grandparents in the kinship chain and their greater prominence in great grandchildren's lives. We noticed that accounts of great grandmotherhood were 'thinner' than accounts of grandmotherhood.

In studying patterns of intergenerational family relations, we had to take account of informants' positionings as both adult children and parents at the same time. Issues of debt and dependency, reciprocity and independence are negotiated both in the context of the interview in giving moral accounts of the self but also in terms of intergenerational family relations and dynamics. Studies suggest that those who transmit resources in families are typically more likely to acknowledge this than those who receive resources. In the four-generation study, elderly people on the cusp of frail old age wanted to remain independent and to be seen to be managing. They did not want to be, or to be seen to be, a burden on their families. Also some adult children in the middle generation born just after the war did not mention the help they had received materially from parents in contrast to the accounts of their parents.

Such unwillingness to give up independence and to fail to report assistance cannot only be understood in relation to the life course positions vis a vis different generations. In a cross national analysis of young people's views of the future we found that young Norwegians who rely upon the welfare state and who had help from parents did not acknowledge this help but instead emphasised their own independence and efforts. Acknowledging the need for care is shaped by the *current discursive and structural context*. Western societies currently put great store by the discourse of love. Family love, like romantic love, denotes love as a gift which by definition rules out obligation. To speak of love as obligation in the same breath is to destroy the meaning of the concept. Moreover the dominant public discourse of western neo liberal political

societies is one of individual responsibility rather than a story of linked lives and linked generations. Accounts, like lives, are multi faceted and full of contradictions.

Strategies adopted here included:

- Adopting a life story approach in the interview and focusing on particular phases in the follow up questions
- Analytically separating out a chronology of life course events and their timing from their life stories
- Creating analytic life course phase themes in the preliminary analysis
- Exploring how in the interviews informants positioned themselves in relation to life course phases and identities

(c) The *time frames* from which informants spoke and the accounts they gave differed and could change over the course of the interview. It was obvious when the oldest (great grandparent) generation was taking an overview of their life. Reflecting their experience of nearly a century of major social change, some recounted public accounts as well as private stories (Cornwell 1984), engaging in meta narratives of Progress in which they told stories of 'real struggle' of moral right over material degradation. Some great grandmothers (and grandmothers) viewed the past through the rose-tinted spectacles of the 'good old days' contrasted with what they *currently* viewed as typical of today's childhoods some aspects of which they were disapproving (see also Samuel and Thompson 1980). At other points in their interviews, especially when speaking about changing educational expectations and employment opportunities for women, they took a present day vantage point: seeing the past as wanting by present day standards. In taking a current standpoint grandmothers who were mothers of adult daughters (in law) were currently witnessing them struggling to combine parenthood with fulltime employment in some cases. While they did not identify with them since they (the grandmothers) had not worked when their children were very young , they

empathised with their daughters – especially with the financial need to work. Thus one informant could move between judging childhood from the values of her time as a mother with a young child while at another point in the interview subscribe to current values concerning present day expectations of motherhood.

Strategies employed here include looking at the forms of speech. Argumentation and rationalisation are commonly employed to explain or explicate how the person thinks about a matter or event from their current time frame and position.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I endorse participatory approaches in the study of childhood where children as informants are enabled to tell their own stories, are listened to and participate actively as research informants. But I would want to argue very strongly that there is a role for the independent analyst and to be skeptical that in claiming to give a voice to marginalized groups that this necessarily gives them greater control to shape knowledge and public agenda.

The role of the research analyst comes very much into its own when one has to study multiple perspectives, positionings and power interests. Studying only one viewpoint in a study of four generation families would be very unsatisfactory. Moreover, an ontological focus on family life as lived reality is important especially when family life spans a century of huge social change as well as seeing family life as socially constructed. In the four generation family study we separated out *analytically* the ontologically realist aspects of the lives of those we studied in terms of historical period, opportunity structures of class, gender and generation while we also took an interpretive standpoint concerning the way family members exercise agency both in their own lives and in the telling of their life stories in the research encounter. In order

to do justice to both, the role of analyst was crucial: notably by being attentive to the ways informants shifted between different time frames, life course and historical phases within a single interview, by paying attention to what was silenced in informants' accounts, by taking account of 'events'. Events happen even though we write our own history. Events, both public and private, are of interest in themselves to us as researchers as well as to our informants. Sybille Bedford, writing her autobiography of her life in Europe in the 1920s, notes that what actually enabled her to write her book *Jigsaw* (and what gives it its great strength) are the events, the relating of which she says enabled her to unlock the characters and most importantly herself. It is crucial to understand how people interpret the world while at the same time seeking to remain true to the classical sociological endeavour of seeing the links between the individual and society – in C Wright Mills' terms the dialectic between structure and agency (Mills 1959).

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