

Interpreting mother-work: linking methodology, ontology, theory and personal biography

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

In my view, the bulk of feminist work carried out on gender divisions of labour is informed by a liberal feminist ontology which "accepts the traditional liberal conception of human nature and the characteristic liberal values of individual dignity, equality, autonomy and self-fulfillment" (Jaggar 39). In contrast to this ontology of self-sufficient and autonomous agents, a relational ontology underpins much of the feminist work on care. A relational ontology posits the notion of "selves-in-relation" (Ruddick 211) and a "different understanding of human nature and human interaction" so that people are viewed as "interdependent rather than independent" (Tronto 1995, 142). This relational ontology occurs in various guises in many disciplines: in varied strands of radical feminist work (see Jaggar); in feminist political theory and philosophy, including work on the "ethic of care" (Benhabib 1987, 1992; Gilligan 1982, 1988; Tronto 1989, 1993, 1995); in legal theory as a discussion of "relational rights and responsibilities" (Minow and Shanley); as well as in feminist critiques of neo-classical economic assumptions about "rational economic man" (Hartsock; Folbre; Edwards and Duncan). While these various academic disciplines have different theoretical approaches, they share an underlying ontological assumption that could be termed "relational." That is, they all underline the weaknesses in liberal, liberal feminist, and neo-Kantian conceptions of individual rights and justice and they argue for a conceptualization of individuals, with their associated rights, as rooted in wider frameworks that holds together concepts of care and justice, rights and responsibilities, individuality and relationships.

In the past decade feminist researchers have encouraged, indeed celebrated, the linking of the personal and the political, the private and the public, and the inclusion of personal biography and critical reflexivity in academic research (e.g. Holland and Ramazanoglu; Ribbens and Edwards). Nevertheless, what has received sparse attention in these discussions is how the ways in which we analyze interview data can be affected by our personal biographies and how data analysis processes are infused with ontological and theoretical assumptions. Recently Dianne Reay has argued that there was a "thin dividing line" (57) between her own working-class experiences and those of the women she interviewed and that there is an "element of exploitation implicit in mixing up" one's own biography with the biographies of the people we interview. While I agree with Reay, my argument is slightly different in that I am calling for greater attention to the more indirect processes between personal biography and our choices of theoretical and ontological orientations (see also Mauthner and [Doucet, Andrea] 1998). My emphasis here is on how a relational ontology and approach found its way into my doctoral work, particularly during the analysis of the interview transcripts, because I was deeply involved in relationships of interdependence and dependence at that time. I was drawn to theoretical and empirical work that expounded on and grappled with the complexities of "care" and "care work" because my days were filled with the rhythms of caring for three small children.

FULL TEXT

Comment l'expérience de cette mère qui s'occupait de ses trois fillettes a influencé son analyse des données recueillies en Angleterre auprès de 46 mères et pères en entrevues ouvertes, et comment elle a mis de l'avant les liens qui existent entre les soins donnés aux autres et l'ontologie.

Before I started the research I had not realized the ways in which the subjects of my research could come into my life, talk to me, tell me about myself. (McMahon 1995, preface)

In the preface to her book, *Engendering Motherhood*, Martha McMahon reflects upon how the ways in which she constructed knowledge from her interviews with 59 Toronto mothers was affected by ongoing reflections about her own life as well as by one particular event. She tells us how after her mother's death, the theme of connectedness became much stronger in her writing:

Participants' talk of connectedness later took on sad shadow meanings for me when, shortly after my initial writing up and research, my own mother died. Perhaps because I am an immigrant and my family of origin lies elsewhere, or perhaps because of the particular way in which my own mother held together the world of my past, I felt torn apart by her death. Thus the theme of motherhood as symbolizing special social bonds of connectedness became a stronger one in the revisions for the book. (McMahon 1995, preface; see also McMahon 1996) [emphasis added]

McMahon's reflections on the links between her private life and public knowledge are not new in the context of long-standing conversations on the central role of reflexivity within feminist methodologies and feminist epistemologies. Indeed, reflexivity, or the attempts to make explicit the multiple ways in which we are located in relation to the people from/with whom we conduct research and construct knowledges, has come to be viewed as a central tenet of feminist methodologies and epistemologies (Stanley and Wise 1983, 1993; Harding). However, what is noteworthy here is McMahon's understated reference to the impact of her changing biography on the manner in which she constructed knowledge. This is different from the oft-repeated references to race, class, gender, sexuality, and geographical location, to mention only a few, and the ways that these locations and associated power differentials are cited during various phases of the research process. Daphne Patai astutely points out how these gestures at self-positioning are often "deployed as badges"; they are meant to represent "one's respect to 'difference' but do not affect any aspect of the research or the interpretive text" (149). I am in agreement with Patai. While social locations are important, reflexivity also means actively reflecting on the ways in which these locations, as constituted by the constant interplay between social structures and agency, actually come to influence the particular approaches (methodological, theoretical, epistemological, and ontological) from within which we conduct research. How do our multiple social locations intersect with the particularities of our personal biographies and how do these intersections influence the processes of conducting research?

In this brief paper, I offer reflections on how my experiences of caring for my three young daughters influenced the ways in which I analyzed the data from open-ended interviews with 46 British mothers and fathers. I emphasize the links between caring and ontology (theory of being), and more specifically, between the ways my interpretations of my own caring practices influenced how I interpreted the caring practices of others. These reflections emerge from my doctoral research (Doucet 1995a) as well as from my involvement with the (British) Women's Workshop on Qualitative Family/Households Research (see Ribbens and Edwards).

Caring and writing about caring

Between 1989 and 1995 I began and completed my doctoral dissertation at the University of Cambridge on gender equality, gender differences, and caring work in British dual-earner households. During those six years, I interviewed 46 women and men about their parenting experiences and I gave birth to three daughters, including twins. As my husband and I were both students living on my doctoral scholarship, we shared much of the caring work of our three daughters between ourselves. Although I did not realize it at the time, my life was almost completely taken up with caring and writing about caring.

In looking back on my doctoral research, I can mark each phase in relation to where I was with my particular mothering practices. In the same way when I look at the photo albums of my three daughters, I can glance past their little faces and know precisely where I was in terms of the research I was conducting. While the first pieces that I wrote during my doctoral research program were carefully grounded in syntheses of varied bodies of sociological literature on families and households, they also originated out of my belief that the academic literature was out of sync with my own experiences of caring for a young child. For example, early on in the research I wrote two pieces on methodological weaknesses in the subject area of gender divisions of domestic labour (Doucet 1993, 1996). I argued that there is a tendency to simplify child care tasks, to lapse child care and housework into the same category, and that there is little recognition of the various stages and changing needs and demands of children over time. I remember clearly that the idea suddenly came to me when I was sitting in the Cambridge University Library and reading a report from the well-known British Social Attitudes Study. I had been up all night with my ten-month-old daughter's teething bout. Bleary-eyed I looked at the way in which the study included only two child care tasks: "looking after children when they are sick" and "teaching children discipline" (Jowell, Witherspoon and Brook 197). My astonishment at the simplicity of these categories gave me the impetus to write the papers.

The links between personal biography and knowledge construction become more complicated, however, when we bring other people's voices into the conversation, and particularly when we attempt to make sense of these voices during data analysis.

Data analysis processes

Over a period of 17 months – which spanned the months before and during my twin pregnancy – I analyzed reams and reams of interview transcripts and I also paid particular attention to how other authors analyzed their interviews and how they interpreted the words of the women they interviewed. A particular turning point in the research came when I was re-reading one of the key British texts on gender and domestic labour, *Managing Mothers*, by Julia Brannen and Peter Moss. This was a book that I had found particularly helpful in instigating my research. Yet something suddenly seemed amiss when I read their description of how mothers expressed an anxiety about the lack of maternal care in the lives of their infant children. The authors referred to this as "the ideological salience of giving time to children" (110-11). Although many authors writing on gender divisions of labour conclude their works by pointing to the larger social and structural changes that are required to assist the increasing numbers of households with two adult earners, I also felt that there was an unsettling sense in which care, particularly child care, was being devalued. While many authors have pointed to the pull of negative and positive tensions in the treatment of motherhood within feminism (e.g. Snitow; Stanworth), the negative tensions are, I would argue, more pervasive in the literature on gender divisions of domestic labour. One of the reasons for this is that women are compared to men in terms of the time, tasks, and responsibilities they undertake within the home and their concurrent progress outside the home in the workplace. In making these comparisons, there is now a solid body of empirical evidence from virtually every country in the world to make the case that women lose considerable status, financial rewards, and work opportunities by continuing to take on most of the household work. What women may gain in terms of personal growth, relationships, and connection with their children seems to pale in comparison to the high cost associated with being the primary parent.

In attempting to offer a different analysis and interpretation of care work, I turned to the wide and vast literature on "care" and the ethic of care within feminist political theory and philosophy, as well as empirical and theoretical works on elder care. I was drawn to research that accorded value to care, connection, and relationships while also recognizing the importance of justice, autonomy, and independence. I gradually came to the view that it was the

ontological assumptions that underpinned research that were particular illuminating, and yet rarely discussed.

Data analysis and a relational ontology

In my view, the bulk of feminist work carried out on gender divisions of labour is informed by a liberal feminist ontology which "accepts the traditional liberal conception of human nature and the characteristic liberal values of individual dignity, equality, autonomy and self-fulfillment" (Jaggar 39). In contrast to this ontology of self-sufficient and autonomous agents, a relational ontology underpins much of the feminist work on care. A relational ontology posits the notion of "selves-in-relation" (Ruddick 211) and a "different understanding of human nature and human interaction" so that people are viewed as "interdependent rather than independent" (Tronto 1995, 142). This relational ontology occurs in various guises in many disciplines: in varied strands of radical feminist work (see Jaggar); in feminist political theory and philosophy, including work on the "ethic of care" (Benhabib 1987, 1992; Gilligan 1982, 1988; Tronto 1989, 1993, 1995); in legal theory as a discussion of "relational rights and responsibilities" (Minow and Shanley); as well as in feminist critiques of neo-classical economic assumptions about "rational economic man" (Hartsock; Folbre; Edwards and Duncan). While these various academic disciplines have different theoretical approaches, they share an underlying ontological assumption that could be termed "relational." That is, they all underline the weaknesses in liberal, liberal feminist, and neo-Kantian conceptions of individual rights and justice and they argue for a conceptualization of individuals, with their associated rights, as rooted in wider frameworks that holds together concepts of care and justice, rights and responsibilities, individuality and relationships.

Many feminists writing on methodology, theory, and epistemology point to the importance of bringing theoretical analysis to bear on the words of the women we interview and to distinguish between experience and knowledge (Code; Currie; Grant 1987, 1993; Smith 1987, 1996). Nevertheless, little attention has been accorded to how ontological assumptions come to play a role in how we construct knowledge out of experience during the processes of data analysis. In a recent paper written on methodological and ethical issues involved with interviewing children Virginia Morrow and Martin Richards have argued that:

the ways of "seeing children" that researchers hold have a profound impact upon the way in which we study children. The methods that we use, the research populations and subjects that we study, and crucially the interpretation of the data collected, are all influenced by the view of children that we take. (Morrow and Richards 98)

In a similar way I am arguing that the ways in which we "see" and "hear" the individuals whom we interview will make a difference to how we construct theory from their words, experiences, and lives. For example, in my research on gender divisions of domestic labour, a wider understanding of domestic responsibility emerged from adjusting and widening the theoretical and ontological vantage points so as to hear not only where women were successful in their attempts to achieve greater autonomy from their children and their household lives, but also to hear how women and men defined and experienced caregiving processes and connection with their children.

There was a direct link between my interpretations of my data and my own caregiving practices. I moved between two ends of a continuum in my relationship with my children. At times I felt the weighty burden of my children's dependence upon me while at other times I was filled with the indescribable joy and calm that comes from being so close to another human being. As I rocked back and forth between these two modes of being and thinking, my interpretations of the interviews I conducted, particularly with the mothers, oscillated between emphasizing issues of, on the one hand, connection, interdependence, and care and, alternatively, issues of autonomy, independence, and justice. Based upon these interpretations, I came to argue for a conceptualization and theorization of

domestic responsibility that emphasized justice and care, autonomy and connection, rights and responsibilities. If we "hear" and conceptualize domestic responsibility within a framework that only emphasizes autonomy and independence, then we may come to view responsibility mainly as an "obligation" that hinders one's individual development and the fullness of their autonomous life. Indeed, synonymous with the predominance of an "equal rights" framework in the field of gender and household labour, under the umbrella of the "dominant ideals of moral autonomy in our culture" (Benhabib 1987, 95), is the ontological and theoretical significance of individualism and the associated view that responsibility will thus be experienced as an obligation and as a "burden." Alternatively, if we listen within a framework, where close relationships and human interdependence are heard and viewed as central for social and emotional well-being, then we may come to an alternative view of responsibility which, when combined with a conception that recognizes obligations and potential burdens, may provide a fuller understanding of domestic responsibility and domestic processes (see Doucet 1995a, 1995b).

Caring as distinct from maternal thinking

Looking back on who I was as a mothering doctoral student, I can name my social location as white, working-class origins, transitional student status, soon-to-be middle-class, and heterosexual. These locations, while critical, were not the only determinants of how I enacted my mothering. Many authors have pointed to how one's experiences of mothering can vary enormously even within shared social locations based on sexualities (Epstein), class (Ribbens) and ethnicity (McMahon). In my own case, what seems to have had particular significance to my mothering practices was that I had a fragile opportunity to undertake a large part of the daily care of my three daughters while also being fulfilled at working on my doctoral dissertation. I was able to stay on my career path while also spending a great deal of time with my children. Given the way that caring is organized in most western societies, this is a rare privilege accorded to few women (and men). This opportunity and privilege provided me with access to ways of seeing and knowing that I may have missed had I mothered within different circumstances.

What I am arguing here shares something in common with Sara Ruddick's claim that those who care for others, in the sense of providing both the love and the labour of care (Graham) may come to perceive relations between individuals in different ways than those who are not intimately involved in caregiving. I cannot do justice to the wide merits of Ruddick's ideas in *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, where she argues that the moral and epistemological perspectives developed through maternal practices could form the basis for a peace politics. I wish only to highlight here how the arguments I am making diverge from those of Ruddick's work in at least two ways. The first difference is in my belief that it is care for dependent others (the very young, the very old, disabled and sick persons) that is the qualifying issue here and not only mothering. Indeed Ruddick's work has been criticized for ways in which maternal thinking can lead to an exclusive focus on the mother-child relationship whereas there are other relations of dependence and interdependence which may give rise to relational modes of thinking (e.g. Dietz). Indeed, as pointed out by Eva Feder Kittay in her work on disability, we all face periods of potential dependency throughout our lives:

At some stage in the lives of each of us we face at least one period of utter dependency; and with accident and disease forever a danger to the most independent of us, we are all, at least potentially, dependents. (8)

Recognizing these moments of dependency assists us in seeing that it is not only the very young and the very old who compel us to theorize human interdependence.

The second way in which my argument differs from those of Ruddick is in my recognition of the ontological complementarity of both justice and care perspectives, of autonomy and connection, of independence and interdependence. These debates have been well-articulated by writers who emphasize the theoretical and

ontological inter-connections between justice and care perspectives (Gilligan 1983; Benhabib 1987) and between rights and responsibilities (Minow and Shanley).

The ways in which these interconnections play out in our daily lives is not straightforward. I have found myself moving in and out of contrasting modes of thought and being depending upon the demands of my work life and the particular joys or traumas that each child may be going through. Underneath my life I can feel the constant tide of connections between those who are close to me and myself. At the same time, I am in agreement with Alison Jagger who points out that feminists have too much to lose politically from a view that prioritizes relations over individuals, or connection over autonomy since there are times when it is in women's interests to sever certain relationships.

Given that women are still defined conventionally in terms of their relations to men and children, given that women are still seen as less rational than men [the] liberal ideals of human dignity, autonomy, equality and individual self fulfillment ... must remain in some way part of feminism, even though ... liberal ideals should be revised or re-conceptualized. (47)

Feminist research and reflexivity

In the past decade feminist researchers have encouraged, indeed celebrated, the linking of the personal and the political, the private and the public, and the inclusion of personal biography and critical reflexivity in academic research (e.g. Holland and Ramazanoglu; Ribbens and Edwards). Nevertheless, what has received sparse attention in these discussions is how the ways in which we analyze interview data can be affected by our personal biographies and how data analysis processes are infused with ontological and theoretical assumptions. Recently Dianne Reay has argued that there was a "thin dividing line" (57) between her own working-class experiences and those of the women she interviewed and that there is an "element of exploitation implicit in mixing up" one's own biography with the biographies of the people we interview. While I agree with Reay, my argument is slightly different in that I am calling for greater attention to the more indirect processes between personal biography and our choices of theoretical and ontological orientations (see also Mauthner and Doucet 1998). My emphasis here is on how a relational ontology and approach found its way into my doctoral work, particularly during the analysis of the interview transcripts, because I was deeply involved in relationships of interdependence and dependence at that time. I was drawn to theoretical and empirical work that expounded on and grappled with the complexities of "care" and "care work" because my days were filled with the rhythms of caring for three small children.

Implicit in these discussions is my view that in spite of good intentions to give voice to women's lives, we are always located within particular theoretical and ontological frameworks and it is from here that we "see," hear, and analyze our research respondents' lives. The difficulty is not so much the choice of paradigm, but rather having to accept that this is the case and that as a result we will focus our attention on certain issues and perhaps ignore others (Mauthner and Doucet; see also Strauss and Corbin; Riessman). The critical research issue involves tracing and documenting our data analysis processes, and the choices and decisions we make, so that others can see for themselves what may have been lost and what may have been gained in the processes of moving from private lives into public knowledge (Mauthner and Doucet). Holland and Ramazanoglu make a similar point when they note that:

Feminists have had to accept that there is no technique of analysis or methodological logic that can neutralize the social nature of interpretation.... Feminist researchers can only try to explain the grounds on which selective interpretations have been made by making explicit the process of decision-making which produces the interpretation, and the logic of method on which these decisions are made. (133)

Conclusions

In critically reflecting upon what reflexivity means in the processes of conducting research and in drawing conclusions and constructing theory from this research, I have come to see the influences of caring for my children on all stages of my doctoral research on domestic life, and most significantly during data analysis. In coming to this realization, I have also come to the view that bringing "strong reflexivity" (Harding) into research means being critically aware and honest about the links between personal biography and theoretical and ontological choices in research. My theoretical framework and ontological assumptions – which emphasize the centrality of relations and relationships combined with a view of individuals within social structures and social institutions – are rooted in well-established scholarly traditions. Yet I sought out these traditions because of my personal experiences of caring for my three daughters. I took my daughters with me as I made sense of the interview transcripts of the 46 mothers and fathers I interviewed and, although the Cambridge University Library does not allow entry to children, they were often there.

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