

# Shifting horizons

## *Reflections on qualitative methods*



*Feminist Theory*

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**Abstract** This article addresses the challenges of developing methodologies which build on the insights of early feminist research and methods, but which also incorporate some of the new innovations in sociological, qualitative research. Feminist research has emphasized the need to capture the everyday lives of women (and others) but this is not so easy once it is realized how ‘messy’ everyday life may be and that we may also not have tools adequate to the art of listening and the task of ‘story telling’. In particular there is a need to incorporate a wide range of sensibilities into the creation of feminist/sociological accounts of everyday lives. These include accounting for emotions, memories, intersubjective meanings, and other intangibles. Finally, the article argues that debates over methodologies should not stop with questions of collecting and analysing data, but must also address the problems of how to write the lives of people differently.

**keywords** *everyday life, feminist research, knowledge production, qualitative methodologies, sociological imaginations*

In the autumn of 2004 I presented a paper at a conference of the AHRB (Arts and Humanities Research Board) Centre for the Study of Law, Gender and Sexuality. The title of the conference was ‘Text and Terrain’ and as a reaction to a perceived emphasis on the importance of textual analysis in feminist legal studies I argued for the importance of researching ‘talk’ and not only ‘text’. At the time I felt it was important to make a plea for retaining a core sociological approach to research in the face of an increasingly strong attraction to textual analysis and highly theoretical work in feminist research. Mine was an argument for giving greater priority to hearing and understanding the ways in which ordinary people interpret and define social interaction, including interactions with law. However, this was not to suggest that interviewing people and analysing their stories was a means to a greater truth and, while acknowledging that collecting in-depth interview data brings a richness and complexity to understanding social life, I also admitted that sociological writing often eliminates much of this richness in the process of turning talk into the written word. I argued at the time<sup>1</sup> that

[T]he process of transcription robs speech of a great deal of its texture even if pauses, laughter and tears, are indicated in the text. Interviews require respondents to provide a linear narrative, which is then 'flattened' onto a page of typescript, robbed of a great deal of expression and non-verbal communication.

Since that time there appears to have been a significant groundswell in the methodological literature which addresses these and similar issues; these contributions reflect slightly different concerns and suggest alternative ways forward but nonetheless they now constitute a distinctive framing of both critique and renewal. Such interventions include John Law (2006) who has been critical of sociological methods for the way in which they turn 'mess' into order. He has argued that everyday life is both messy and complex and, as a consequence, methods must be developed which can both grasp the mess and then find ways to represent messiness without forcing a coherence and kind of logic on to lived experience. Les Back (2007) has added to this debate by insisting that sociology has the tools to capture and reflect 'real' social life if only it would reclaim its status as a craft which operates both ethically and sensitively in relation to the lives that it seeks to understand and recount. He argues for the 'art of listening' and returns to the work of C. Wright Mills who is increasingly being rediscovered as a source of sociological inspiration.

Of course there are others who have also contributed to this reappraisal.<sup>2</sup> The list of contributors could become unmanageably long if every step in the recently shifting horizons of qualitative work were to be fully noted. But qualitative sociology does seem to have produced a critical mass of work which signifies that the debate over ways of doing and creating sociological knowledge is moving back to centre stage rather than being left on the margins. There is a kind of battle for the heart of the discipline going on, a battle where advocates of theorized reflexive empirical research (Heaphy, 2007) seek to challenge the grand theorists and the social essayists.<sup>3</sup> These feel like exciting times. However, in this general enthusiasm it is important that we do not forget the significance of feminist methodologies which have played such an important part both in providing foundations for more innovative sociological research methods and in striving to keep research theoretically informed. Although it is important to acknowledge that feminist research has its critics and certainly may not have all the answers to contemporary research questions, it is equally possible to see the roots of many of our current innovative strategies in the interdisciplinary orientations and methodological risk taking of feminist work at the end of the last century (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). Feminist critiques of sociology<sup>4</sup> were driven by the insistence that sociology should better represent the lives of women, lives which were either ignored or rendered in very one-dimensional terms by most sociological studies. In critiquing classical sociological approaches feminist work challenged the distinctions between researcher and researched, incorporated narrative and literary genres, championed qualitative work, and promoted reflexive standpoint research. Most importantly, feminist research was its own most trenchant critic; it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that

feminist methodologies existed then in a state of constant challenge and continual reformulation. Feminist methodologies could not, of course, stand still. In a story which is too long and complex to recount here, the distinctive strands of feminist methods noted above (sub)merged into empirical sociological practices while other feminist concerns were drawn into epistemological and ontological debate, poststructuralist theorizing, deconstruction, feminist philosophy and ethics, and also towards the development of new theoretical departures such as queer theory and textual analysis.<sup>5</sup> The merger of feminist methods with sociological research practices (at least in the qualitative domain) meant that many of the early feminist challenges became taken for granted or normal practice. In so doing their critical roots were gradually forgotten, the excitement that was generated faded, and the desire to create a wiser, more holistic form of research was gradually diminished. It is however a resurgence of the desire for sociology to achieve a more attentive and empathic practice that has led to the current demands that I note above. These demands require that empirical research should take risks again, but also that it should connect with the lives of the people who contribute to research processes while finding ways of presenting complex layers of social and cultural life in sentient ways. By sentient I mean in ways that are aware of the emotions and perspectives of sociological subjects while also working within a sociological imagination which remains attentive to the tenets of the discipline. In other words sociology should not strive to become literature, psychology, psychoanalysis or even popular biography. The discipline cannot escape the requirement to strive for a sociological imagination. In Wright Mills' (1959) often quoted terms this means:

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. (1959: 6)

I do not intend to wax lyrical about Wright Mills because although his work certainly captures a core essence of the kind of sociological enterprise many still find desirable, his writing must be understood in the context of the moment (and place) it was written. We cannot import him wholesale into a sociological project some 50 years later in a different time and place. But we can appreciate that he took individual experiences and sentiments to be meaningful to the wider sociological project. It is this aspect of his contribution that I am most interested in pursuing. So, do we need to be doing sociological research differently and with more imagination in order to give more of a voice to the lives and experiences of sociological subjects? In posing this question, I do propose to focus mostly on empirical research which takes the form of fieldwork. This is because it is this interface between the everyday lives of ordinary people and the sociological craft of story telling where so many practical, ethical and theoretical problems arise (Gordon, 2008).

## Constructing alternative visions of everyday life

Having been involved in a number of empirical research projects on different aspects of personal life over recent years I have become acutely aware of how easy it can be to 'hear' or interpret what is said according to available or dominant theoretical sociological positions. But at the same I possessed an awareness that these accounts could also offer much more nuanced and sometimes quite contradictory narratives which could be drawn out and woven into different perspectives. This dilemma is far from unique of course and, as Beverley Skeggs confesses in relation to her own work:

This led me at times to map my frameworks directly onto their [women's] experiences without listening to or hearing what they were saying. . . . It was a production of my desperateness to understand the infinite number of things that were happening around me that led to this lapse in reflexivity. (2001: 31)

In re-reading my own transcripts of interviews with mothers, fathers, grandparents and children I became aware that they were telling stories of connectedness, endurance, love and optimism just as much as they were telling stories of hate, separation and sadness. But the closer I looked at these accounts, and also at how the accounts had been 'written up', the more I felt that the research questions pursued and the ways in which the data have been presented perhaps also lacked sufficient depth. In John Law's term they were not messy enough. In particular these representations of people's lives lacked a grasp of what Jennifer Mason (2008) has referred to as creative, ethereal and sensory affinities. These affinities are the ways in which people connect with each other. They might exist in the invisible connections between people revealed in looks or particular expressions more than in words. They may be captured by an acknowledgement of physical resemblances or even the remarking of similar modes of speech, accents, smiles or general demeanour and deportment. Or the depth and meaning of relationships might exist in the significance of shared memory or even in aspirations for the future. This domain, which can be so easily overlooked, can be referred to as the realm of the imaginary in people's everyday lives. These things may not be literally tangible and may not be easily seen or heard – unless, as Back argues, sociology practises more the art of listening. In this way we could say that sociology has treated people as too material and too rational. In part it is also an acknowledgement that sociological subjects are selves-in-process, not fixed at the point of interview but part of their own past and the socio-cultural history that has helped shaped them, and of course selves in the process of becoming.

Amongst these facets of everyday life that research has not really grasped have also been emotions and feelings. Much more is written about the problematic relationship between emotions and sociology now<sup>6</sup> but how sociology (rather than psychology or psychoanalysis) actually 'hears' and reads emotions remains quite problematic. If we assume that people do not always express their feelings in a straightforwardly descriptive manner then how should sociology interpret what may be textually opaque? And it is also possible that some feelings (particularly about relationships) are

hard to articulate; there may simply not be convenient modes of expression.

One way around some of these dilemmas has been to change the presentation of sociological data. Thus Corden and Sainsbury (2006) have pointed to the increased use of verbatim quotations in much published empirical work. They note that sociologists adopt this style in order to bring their texts 'alive' and to introduce a greater 'authenticity' to their accounts. The verbatim quote has become a way of bringing 'real lives' into the sociological text. The extent to which this is a successful way of making sociological accounts more authentic or 'real' is open to debate (or even refutation), but what is interesting for this discussion is the way in which so many sociologists now seek to do this. The aim seems to be to 'get closer' to real people and also to make sociological texts have texture.<sup>7</sup> As someone who is manifestly 'guilty' of following this practice, I would argue that this strategy also has its roots in early feminist methodology, particularly the idea of giving a voice to the voiceless or even to demonstrate the sophistication and depth of everyday thinking which is in turn a (hoped-for) strategy for empowering the erstwhile subjugated sociological subject. These strategies may be flawed or idealistic, but potentially they do give space for multiple views and mess. The questions may be whether we give enough space for these narratives, whether we chop them up too much into manageable bite-size pieces, or whether we use them too much as simple illustration rather than points of departure for deeper thinking. Back (2007) has been particularly critical of the tendency for writers to assume that these long quotations can speak 'for themselves'. This he sees as an abdication of the responsibility of the sociologist to provide analysis. But whether quotations are long or short there remains the issue of interpretation, since even the simple act of situating a quotation in a particular place in a narrative orchestrates meaning to a considerable extent.

Here I want to introduce a short passage of quotation which I think is useful as a way to show that a few words can convey a great deal of meaning but where the meaning(s) is (are) in large part unstated, even intangible. This quotation comes from an ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) funded study on gay and lesbian marriage carried out in 2005–7.<sup>8</sup> The couple who are the focus of the interview are Stella who was 48 years old and Denise who was 45, both were white and professional and home owners. They had been together for 8 years and Stella was American and Catholic while Denise was British and of no religious affiliation. In this snippet Beccy Shipman who carried out the interviews asks whether the marriage ceremony they had held had changed their relationship.

Beccy: Did you feel differently after the ceremony about your relationship? Has it changed things?

Denise: I don't know, I suppose because we have been together so long anyway . . .

Stella: You know I am like an old shirt . . .

Denise: An old shoe.

Because this is such a short extract it is open to many readings. As Lynne Cameron would argue,<sup>9</sup> it leaves traces for us to follow. Thus it is possible to infer the unspoken affection between the lines and feel the comfortable-ness which is part of this relationship. It does not mean that this relationship is 'only' these things, but one can get from this a feeling of warmth and also of humour. If I add a bit more to this quotation this reading might be consolidated – or it might not:

Beccy: When you exchanged your rings the first time did you make any kind of vows or promises or anything like that?

Stella: I promised to pay the credit card on demand I expect. No, I do not think we did because we bought them together didn't we really? No I think it was just by sort of understanding really wasn't it? I do not remember doing anything.

Denise: No I do not think we did.

Stella: We have always been fairly informal haven't we? 'Oh so you are not going back to your husband then? Ok I suppose you want your tea.'

This additional trace gives more texture to the relationship. But it adds a number of other possible threads to follow. For example does the quip by Stella that she will pay the credit card bill indicate that she controls the couple's finances? Or is it just a joke? This is a question that I, as keeper of the full interview transcript, can possibly answer, at least to a degree but obviously it is feasible to read this passage in a potentially more sinister way if control over financial resources is equated with power and inequality in relationships. But this line of enquiry also raises immediately whether money management styles in lesbian relationships should be read in the same way as they tend to be in heterosexual relationships. Clearly I could pursue this line of debate further and deeper. I could also keep adding snippets which would take us down other avenues. At each step it would be possible to examine the position from which an interpretation is being made. It would also be possible to link the lives that are expressed here to the socio-cultural history of both of these women, and also to their own biographies. This would obviously be a useful exercise (and one that many researchers now practise especially in group analysis of transcripts) because it reveals the many possible layers of meaning that are being negotiated. Equally in transcripts I have picked up traces of sadness, anger, hurt and so on. The question we are left with is therefore whether we leave these 'intangibles' embedded in the verbatim quotes and hope the reader can find them, or whether we allow them to flow beyond the speaking subjects and into the sociological text.<sup>10</sup>

## Creating data in new ways?

I have argued above that a primary form of data for sociology is the spoken word (usually derived from taped interviews) or narrative (the transcribed text). It is well established that 'talk' in interview settings is a co-production, directed to a greater or lesser extent by the interviewer and the research focus. However, not all participants in research abide by the

'rules' and it is also possible to devise more conversational styles of interviewing which are open to different responses and directions. This raises two issues: to what extent do we relinquish control over the interview and what do we do with material which may not 'fit' our research questions? Again, these are familiar quandaries to feminist methodologists. Allowing participants more control over the direction of the interview may seem a 'democratic' way forward, but it can mean that we (as sociologists) are deflected away from precisely the things that we think matter. People may not wish to dwell on things that they fear will show them in a bad light, for example, and while this is understandable it may also mean that research is restricted to fairly anodyne fields. Sometimes of course interviewers themselves do not want to follow participants into uncharted or risky seeming territory. One such field is to do with emotions where researchers are increasingly worried about upsetting interviewees – particularly if they are children or appear vulnerable in some way. Ethics committees are especially worried about both consent and distress and arguably these concerns could push some issues beyond reach of sociological research. This creates a tension if, just at the point when research is attempting to capture or realize a fuller, messier conception of social and personal life, we are constrained from doing so because research has to avoid difficult topics for fear of causing distress.

Looking more optimistically at attempts to expand the range of methods we use, sociology has increasingly turned to the elicitation of meanings through 'things'. By this I mean that rather than approaching issues directly through a list of questions, more research is using devices such as photo elicitation (Harper, 2002) or family albums (Spence and Holland, 1991), or the discussion of the meaning of treasured items (Pink, 2004), or how people decide to select objects when they move house (Marcoux, 2001). The importance of 'things' has long been acknowledged in anthropology but they have been seen as less significant in sociology (Appadurai, 2006; Miller, 1998). Things are invested with meanings and a focus on things (such as photographs or keepsakes) can allow people to speak about subjects that matter to them and in a way which is less formal than in the interview context. Some researchers are also using devices such as 'memory books' (Thomson and Holland, 2005) as a way of building prompts to memory which in turn help create a denser picture of life than is usually achieved by the snapshot interview. Yet others ask participants to draw images. So, for example, in our study of post-divorce childhoods (Smart et al., 2001) we asked children to draw their home(s). We also asked them to fill in a circle diagram (often with concentric circles) with the names of people they felt more or less close to. We started to use these methods mainly to reduce the intensity (and boredom) of long interviews with young children, but also as ways of making talking easier. Spencer and Pahl (2006) also used concentric circles in their study of friendship as a way of 'getting at' closeness. These are useful devices because they are a kind of joint activity or at least they become a joint engagement which alters the relationship between participant and interviewer. See the example of a child's drawing in Figure 1.





**Figure 1** *This picture was created by a boy we interviewed in one of our studies of divorce (see Smart et al., 2001: 50). The drawing is of two houses with a wall between them. There is a little door in the wall (bottom right) through which the child could pass whenever he was moving from his mother's house to his father's. But the child has also drawn himself with one half of him on one side of the wall and the other half on the other side, he is cut in two.*

Figure 1 is one drawing amongst several we collected in our research with children. Having done this however we were faced with the issue of what to do with them. Ultimately we used drawings mainly as illustrations to our text and this raises the question of whether such use is really adequate. The question is whether we should have sought to analyse this (and other) drawing(s) more deeply and if so, how we would have done so? The picture invites a psychological, even perhaps psychoanalytic, reading. But is this appropriate? After all why would we use these methods for analysing drawings while not using them for the text of the interviews? If we use devices like this to capture intangibles like emotions, are we actually equipped to deal with the data we collect? What small analysis we did of the drawings, tended to interpret the drawings in line with our prior interpretations of what the children had already said but this might well have missed out on those feelings and 'codes' that may exist in visual representations more than in narrative representations (Elsley, 1997). So drawings, and to some extent photographs, invite a different kind of analysis if we wish to use them for more than eliciting more textured talk.

I do not have definitive answers to these questions but it seems it would be useful to start thinking about these problems before we start to imagine that 'new' devices will readily bring new insights or unproblematic forms of analysis. I also have some reservations about borrowing modes of analysis which are not at least grounded in, or epistemologically akin to, a sociological project. Psychoanalysis is one strong example of this. Although many do rely on psychoanalysis (such as Craib, 1994; Hollway



and Jefferson, 2000) it is important to be attentive to epistemological differences and not to assume that these can simply be merged or laid aside. Psychoanalytic methods work, it seems to me, with a presumption that the application of, for example, free association interviews or an understanding of the 'defended self', will reveal a different, more valuable, set of understandings behind what is actually said. This is a kind of excavation project. Sociological work on the other hand is more inclined to tolerate a greater range of potential meanings and also to appreciate that meanings are not stable. Thus new approaches are emerging which analyse both transcript data and visual data in terms of the meanings they evoke rather than for a hidden or underlying meaning. If we accept that there is not a fixed or core meaning behind what is said or drawn or depicted, then looking for (various) traces of meanings in the words used or the images created seems a fruitful way forward.

### The challenge of writing sociologically

This issue brings me to my final remarks on the challenge of writing sociologically. Many discussions of developing new, sensitive or innovative methodologies focus on the practices of collecting data and/or the problems of how to analyse the data. But there is a third phase which needs consideration and that is how then to present the worlds and experiences that have been witnessed. I have noted above that sociologists have used the method of incorporating more verbatim quotes to bring their texts 'to life'. Another method of writing has been to place the author of the text more visibly on the page either by way of some brief autobiographical detail (Devine, 2004: 1–3) or through more fully fledged autobiographical writing – a method which is strongly associated with early feminist work (Kuhn, 1995; Steedman, 1986). These modes of writing show the relationship between author and the production of ideas and deny the fallacy that there can be a neutrally produced text. But I want to consider other ways of changing how we write which may go beyond these established modes or even beyond elaborating our writing with photographs and quotations. I want to pose the question of whether sociology can take more risks by writing in ways which will engage the reader more through the act of writing itself. Should the author of a sociological text think more about the reader and how their representation of the lives of their subjects impacts upon the reader? This would be a different strategy from that of bringing the writer into the writing; rather it would be a way in which the writer would connect differently with the reader. In this approach, the writing becomes itself a craft not simply a means to record issues, ideas and data. Borrowing Back's idea of sociology returning to the idea of itself as a craft, I argue that sociological writing should also become more self conscious of itself as a craft which has responsibilities not only to sociological subjects of study but also to engage the sociological reader. This would mean a greater attentiveness to tone, pace, syntax and flow. Such writing would be always thoughtful about the (unknown) reader with the intent of keeping the reader engaged, being attentive to the (possible) feelings of the

reader, and seeking to link the reader with the subject through the medium of the text. It is probably true to say that we know when we encounter opaque, tortured, boring and/or vacuous writing in the discipline. But if we are guilty of writing qualitative sociology in this way then perhaps we should ask whether it is worth being so thoughtful about our fieldwork methods, our ethics and our careful analysis if all that hard work just wilts or even dies on the page. This craft of sociology should perhaps include elements of story telling, of capturing the imagination, of engaging sentiments, as well as conveying knowledge.

One example of an attempt to do this can be found in a paper by Ann Game (2001) in which she grapples with the problem of expressing feelings about her relationship with her horse. I find this a very brave paper, not simply because of the subject matter which is still rather marginal in sociology, but because of her attempts to express bodily rather than cerebral knowledge. She notes:

People who live with animals experience connectedness and cross-species communication daily. It is a commonplace, for example, that cats and dogs are highly tuned to the emotional states of those with whom they live. . . . Different species attune to each other, *live* with and through each other. . . . Horse lovers will tell you of dreaming of riding along the beach galloping as close to the waves as possible, with hooves splashing sea and sand. Whether or not they have actually done it, they know it already, in an eternal realm. (2001: 2, emphasis in original)

In her writing on horse–human relationality Game seeks to evoke a different way of knowing about the connectedness of humans and other creatures. She seeks to avoid anthropomorphism and also a human-centred understanding and standpoint and tries to express the relationship through bodily feelings and even, as in the extract above, through dream metaphors. Because the relationship she is trying to capture and relate is not with a language-speaking subject, Game is forced to find creative ways of articulating the communication. She calls upon shared experiences and knowledge (at least it is shared with other riders or readers who relate to animals) and uses metaphors, allusions and descriptions to capture a realm which is rarely expressed sociologically. She is in many ways pushing the boundaries of how knowledge can be shared. Her paper includes magical creatures such as Centaurs, references to classical writings on the horse and dressage, metaphors of flying and falling, combined with explanations of experiences gained through bodily practices and shared trust and dependency. The paper addresses the reader in a range of registers, never settling for just one style but weaving several together so that he or she is left with the feeling of an experience and not just the memory of someone else's ideas. Jacobsen and Marshman (2008) argue in a similar vein that Zygmunt Bauman's writing style is significantly different to most sociological work<sup>11</sup> because of the way he uses metaphor to convey meaning. They see his work as poetical and hence highly evocative and suggest that this powerful way of writing, and the way that it breaks conventions in order to convey meaning, in part explains his immense influence. This suggests to me that

we need to give more consideration to how we write. Again it is fruitful to return to early feminist work which did break down the barriers between disciplines and which was also brave enough to incorporate other styles of writing and ways of conveying meaning. This process requires that greater thought is given to how we write and whether we think more creatively about the ways our writing could be read or received.

## Final remarks

In this article I have raised more problems than I can solve but I think it would be unwise to strive prematurely for closure on the debates that are ongoing. I have also omitted any discussion of the structural and institutional constraints that operate on research and that make risk taking in methods quite difficult. I have touched on ethics briefly, but have not dwelt on the new ethical dilemmas that many 'new' methods bring with them (Edwards and Mauthner, 2002). Many of the methods that are becoming 'popular' (for example, the use of cameras, videos and memory books and so on) can be seen as highly intrusive into people's lives. It is not simply that we may be stirring up emotions through these methods but that our participants may not expect such an intensive engagement nor may they be entirely happy to give up their time and energies to something as equivocal as sociological research when it can be so demanding.

Clearly the methods we use should be devised for a purpose and so should be shaped to meet particular research questions. However, we are increasingly realizing that methods are themselves also a means of knowledge co-construction. Using slightly more ambitious or risky methods, for example, might mean that the researcher can start to construct different ways of understanding or may become more open to the things that matter to participants and not just to the specific research project. We have now abandoned the idea that methods are simply a set of techniques that, once established, can just be applied. This means beginning to see methods as fluid and capable of changing shape depending on their specific purpose or circumstances. But I have also argued that while we develop more fluid and interdisciplinary methods which can shift horizons of knowledge, we also need to think more rigorously about how we compose our writing and convey our sociological imaginations to the reader through the text.

## Notes

1. Since that conference I have been involved in a Node of the ESRC's Centre for Research Methods called (for short) Real Life Methods1 (<http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk>). One of the main aims of the Node has been to explore the use of qualitative methods beyond straightforward interviewing and to experiment with mixing different methods such as quantitative, longitudinal qualitative, visual (including photo elicitation), quasi-experimental, and ethnographic (amongst others).
2. Brannen, 2005; Doucet, 2008; Gordon, 2008; Mason, 2008; Mauthner, 2000; Plummer, 2001; Smart, 2007a; Stanley, 1995; Thomson and Holland, 2005.

3. Here I would include such figures as Zygmunt Bauman and Richard Sennett.
4. For example, see Harding (1991), Oakley (1981), Roberts (1981), Smith (1974), Stanley and Wise (1983).
5. For example, see Alcoff and Potter (1993), Barrett (1992), Butler (1998), Cosslett et al. (2000), Elam (1994), Lennon and Whitford (1994), Riley (1988).
6. For example, see Barbalet (2002), Bendelow and Williams (1998), Burkitt (1997), Evans (2003), Hochschild (2003).
7. By chance I was reading a book review in *Sociology* by Melissa Deary (2008). She wrote: 'The book is at its best when the "voices" of the author and participants come through – whether in the form of her informal autobiographical reflections on her subject or extracts from interview transcripts (I would have preferred to see more of the latter). At these times, it is highly readable and gives what is even now a rare glimpse into what it is actually like to parent a disabled child' (p. 198).
8. The study, funded by the ESRC, ref. R000230418, was called 'Gay and Lesbian Marriage: An exploration of the meanings and significance of legitimating same sex relationships'. The research team consisted of Carol Smart, Jennifer Mason and Beccy Shipman. See Shipman and Smart (2007); Smart (2007b, 2008).
9. Lynne Cameron, 5 September 2008, personal email communication.
10. For example Hollway and Jefferson (2000) use the method of 'free association' interviews which place much store in what is 'not' said, or is hard to express. Other, less psychoanalytically oriented approaches, may also seek to interpret meaning from the contradictions in what people say, or the complex layers of meanings that are built up during the course of an interview.
11. Unfortunately they assume that all the 'rest' of sociology writes in a quasi-scientific and highly arid positivist style. This seems to be a gross calumny but it need not detain us here.

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