

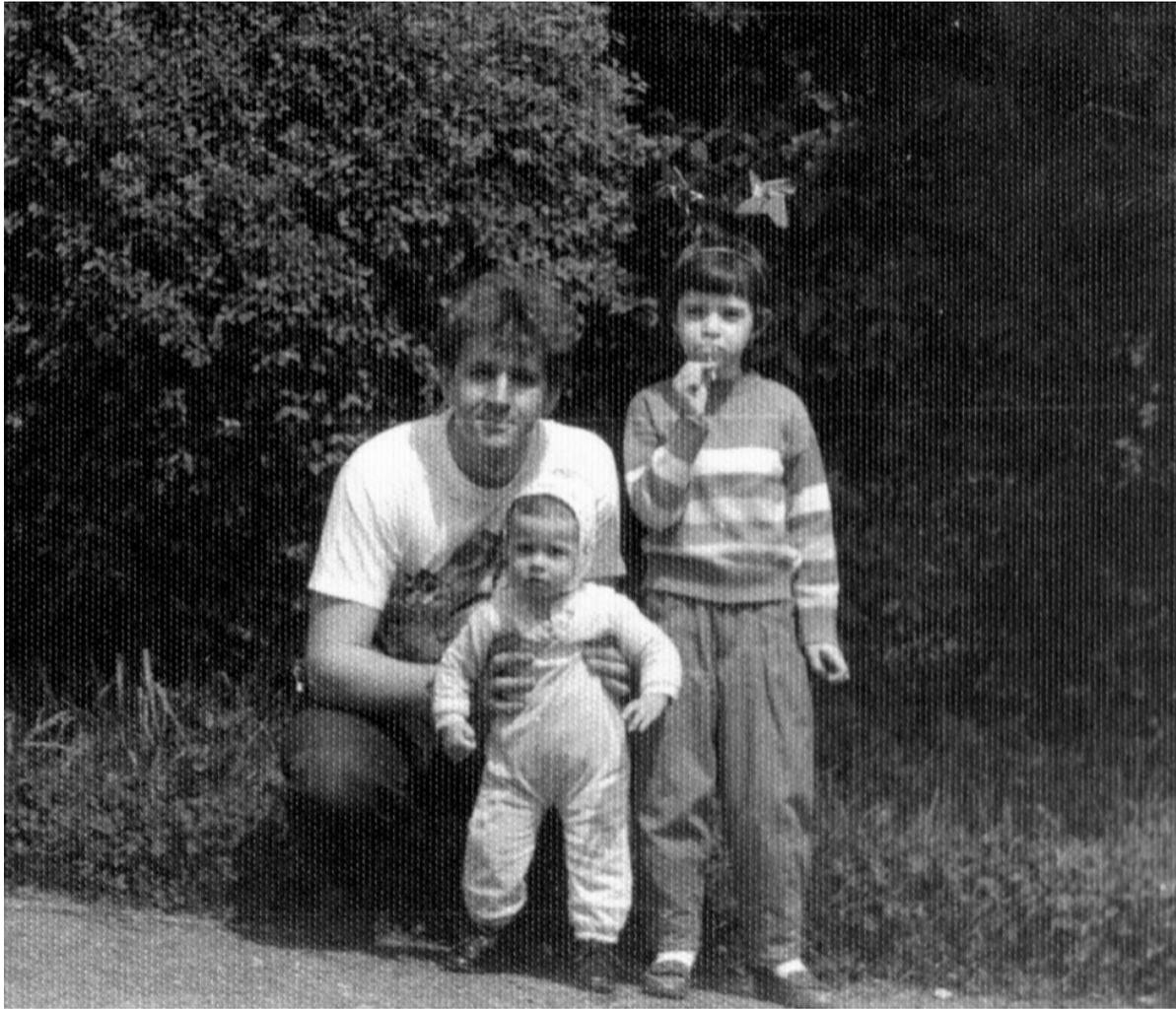
Shifting perspectives: Becoming a feminist researcher while studying fatherhood and love / Alexandra Macht

Abstract

In family studies, writing from the heart is a political gesture. In this paper I present some reflections on the process of researching fatherhood, and through this example foreground the analytical connections between family and feminist methodologies. The aim of my doctoral research, on which I base this manuscript, was understanding how involved fathers experience love for their children in two different socio-political contexts, those of Romania and Scotland. I chose these two locations to understand if certain ways of feeling *travel* from the Western to the Eastern part of Europe. However, these two locations also represent the place of my birth (Romania) and of my work (Scotland). Travelling between them has shaped how I approached my research design and influenced how I re-constructed the social world of fathers during the stages of data collection and analysis. In this process, as a researcher I experienced some setbacks as I was writing, because personal memories of my family relationships rose to the surface asking for inclusion and interpretation. The analysis presented in this article is thus a multi-layered one: by using a feminist analytical lens I re-evaluated my childhood memories of being parented and have altered my understanding of the meaning of parental love; by interacting with fathers during fieldwork, I saw my relationship to my father in a new light and grew to develop a deeper understanding of the emotional complexities of gender dynamics.

Introduction

I begin this paper by focusing on a photograph taken in 1992 of my father, my younger sister and me in one of the many central parks in Bucharest. In the picture, my father smiles back in a restrained yet confident way at my mother who was engaged in taking our photograph. The photo was taken just three years after a violent revolution which brought about the fall of communism, not only in Romania but in the entire Eastern-European Bloc¹. Contrary to other selective portrayals of Romanian parenting in the literature², my experience of growing up in the fragmented post-socialist landscape was not only about fears, the violence of revolution or experiences of oppression, but mainly about love, pride and resilience.



In 1992, my father was a 27-year old with two young daughters, ages 5 and 1. He was working - in what would now be considered a typical working-class occupation - in an ordinary, relatively well-paid job at a factory manufacturing airplane parts. At the time the photo was taken, my father did not know that he was about to enter the service industry and work for large European and American corporations for the following 20 years of his life. I focus on this image, because it marks a moment in history and it speaks about relationships: my father's own relationship to his masculinity, his role as a father, his class position, and his sense of power and powerlessness in what were uncertain political and economic times. It is also about my father's relationship to my mother - a seemingly 'invisible', yet essential presence to our 'picture-perfect' trio. His interactions with us were also underscored by the parenting he had received from his own family. But this picture is also about love, the love we shared and continue to share as family members. A love complicated by our combined biographies and multiple intersections (of age, gender and generation), by our everyday lived experiences as members of a connected group, and replete with the ideal images we continue to hold about what it means to be 'a family'.

Bringing the personal to the forefront

Accurately capturing emotions in family life through research is difficult. This could be due in part to the constraints of academic rigour in framing the everyday messiness of emotions, but also to the methods used to record the fleeting and changing occurrence and intensity of emotions as they are lived out by family members. Most methods seem limiting, when faced with the vast complexity and creative chaos of individuals' range of emotional experiences, especially as these are also embodied and often unconscious³.

In this paper I bring into the foreground the often hidden personal and emotional experiences which are attached to the process of undertaking a doctoral research project. My research focused on the personal experiences of love of a group of involved fathers from Scotland and Romania. My main argument here is that the subjective experience of the researcher matters and is important to the research topic, without having to become self-indulgent. Furthermore, the personal family experiences of the researcher are an essential part of family methodologies, and it is through utilizing emotional reflexivity that these can be brought to light and analytically incorporated into the research process. *Emotional reflexivity*⁴ is an increasingly predominant component of qualitative research, defined as a reliance upon emotions to decide how to act in the social world⁵. Throughout the research, I traced my own and my participants' reflections on emotions and examined how these are constituted relationally: by noticing my own emotions, I understood how I could act during the interviews with the participants; in turn, their reactions helped me to re-evaluate my own role as a family member and daughter. Our relationship had a processual development which was emotionally-mediated.

The study of emotions in family life is in fact the study of close relationships. In conducting research with families, there is an inevitable blurring of the boundaries between objective and subjective knowledge. This awareness links to the second wave feminist thinkers' dictum that the personal is always political⁶, and serves as a useful starting point to construct new methodological approaches in the study of personal lives⁷. Donna Harraways⁸ argued that feminist researchers interpret the social world from positions of situated knowledge. Mine was a socio-constructionist one, inspired by the work of the British socio-psychologist Ian Burkitt⁹, who argued that emotions are socially created between people as they relate to each other in everyday interactions. This represents a shift in the way in which some sociologists of emotions¹⁰ have imagined what these are and where they can be found.

Burkitt¹¹, as one of the first proponents of emotional reflexivity, situates emotions in the daily interactions we have with one another, in those segments of talk, activity and togetherness which

create our personal relationships. Thus, rather than thinking that emotions are intrinsic, determined by the boundaries of our bodies and inner world, or viewing them as mysteriously occurring separate sensations, Burkitt's theory reframed them to represent the connection, proximity, and mutual co-creation which occurs between individuals.

To a large extent the intimate life of family members is an ideal context in which to conduct sociological research on emotions. However, such research also can present many ethical obstacles. Since guidelines on how to best conduct research in this field exist elsewhere¹², I will detour in this paper from lengthy explanations of qualitative research in the realm of family. I choose to focus instead on some small innovations in qualitative interviewing which I developed during my doctoral research and discuss how I have integrated the personal with the analytical in the process of writing up.

Talking to fathers about love

Love and fatherhood are two topics that have exerted a certain fascination on social scientists for many years, but only recently have coalesced in empirical research. In the current sociological literature, there is very little research about the love shared between parents and children, and the contemporary intimate father's role¹³ in connection to Scottish and Romanian masculinities. By applying Burkitt's relational understanding of emotions, my research situated a group of 47 European men who are fathers, specifically 27 Scottish and 20 Romanian fathers,¹⁴ as relationally and emotionally interdependent members of an intimate social network and considered their experiences of love in relation to their children, their partners and their own parents. In my thesis I argued that the ways in which fathers express their emotions are experienced as a tension between the masculine emotional demands of stoicism and the novel discursive prerogative for intimate self-disclosure (or that they shift between love and detachment according to their social relationships). Conclusively, I conceptualized this process as 'emotional bordering'¹⁵ inspired by Barrie Thorne's¹⁶ concept of 'gender borders'.

Amongst emotions, love is perhaps one of the most powerful ones connected to the role of a parent. I have situated it at the center of the investigation, in a feminist attempt to de-feminize love as an emotion. Primarily, it was bell hooks¹⁷ work, urging for a reconsideration of masculinity in relation to love, that helped me focus on the topic of research. In addition, I was interested in how fathers were constructing their emotional identity and involvement in performing their fatherly role, to build upon previous work on fatherhood from a feminist

perspective¹⁸. This is because men are normatively conceived through gender stereotyping as ‘unemotional’ rather than ‘loving’, and love is routinely circumscribed to women¹⁹. Therefore, it was important to study the language fathers use to describe love and their relationships with family members, because language does not only reflect gender, but it also reproduces it²⁰.

Qualitative interviews are a commonly used tool in sociological research which deals with aspects of social life that are hard to quantify. I employed semi-structured interviews to leave space for flexibility, and to allow participants to direct the flow and content of the interview. When I designed the research, I thought it was the best way to investigate the complex nature of the topic under discussion (i.e. love) because it offered the potential for recording in-depth explanations of the meaning and the unfolding process of loving in family life. In addition, qualitative research stems from an interpretivist perspective, used often in feminist research to challenge the positivist epistemological viewpoint²¹.

Visual listening

As part of a focus on the study of love as a socially-constructed emotion, paying attention to the five senses formed a unique part of the ways in which I gathered the research material during my fieldwork. This is because sensory engagement – such as the tactile, visual, auditory and olfactory – formed a large part of the experience of embodying the father’s role and expressing emotions, a point echoed elsewhere in the literature²². I incorporated this into the framework for analysis as I was trying to represent fathers’ embodied experiences of relating to their children. As I did this, it shaped what I was coding and how I was ‘listening’ to the narratives. Following Les Back’s²³ incentive, I listened visually: this means that I paid attention to participants’ non-verbal conduct and self-presentation, and not only to their words. The ways in which fathers presented themselves, and the visual symbols which they brought to the research encounter – their accessories, the way they dressed, their mannerisms, tattoos and other visible markings – were all noted and formed part of my field notes, so I made these visible by incorporating them into the transcriptions. For example, when I interviewed Stephen, a Scottish father, I noted visual symbols that marked him in particular ways. As he explains in the data excerpt below, due to the way he looks he encounters a critical social gaze in relation to public displays of affection regarding his daughter:

(...) people look at you. Especially when you’re a dad. “Oh you’re beating your child up!” [laughter] Do you know what I mean? They kinda look at you and then they see the skinhead there [rubs his bald head] and they go “Oh!” But she’s ok. I kinda get over that

quickly 'cause I know that what I was doing wasn't wrong. It was just something I had to deal with.

Stephen describes how the social gaze places him under scrutiny by enforcing a normative image of a father and by associating certain visual symbols with potentially harmful behaviors. Because the social response that Stephen experiences is heavily influenced by his self-presentation emphasized by his bald head and the tattoos visible on his arms (of which he was self-aware, touching them as he recounted the episode during the interview) the social judgement marks how he thinks he is perceived and adds considerable pressures to his performance of a good father's role. In this episode, Stephen's emotional strategy is to adopt a resilient emotional attitude, in response to social cues which position him as a 'threat' to his daughter. He is prioritizing the close relationship and love he shares with his daughter over his need to be perceived as a moral father. However, only at the end of the interview, did he reveal to me that our conversation, despite being pleasant, made him sweat a lot. The invisibility of Stephen's sweating – potentially due to the anxiety of meeting the institutional power I represented, or the fear of being judged – was something I could not record through the visual listening approach, which points towards the potential limitations of this method.

Embodiment

Furthermore, other Romanian and Scottish fathers focused on the embodied aspects²⁴ of their practices of love by referring to how they have created a connection with the child, through their senses: seeing them, smelling them, hearing them and touching them. Daniel and Gordon recalled moments of their children's dancing, Charlie described his family as 'a huggy family', while Ovidiu was particularly fond of his young son's familiar smell. Such embodied instances translated into our conversations. For example, it is important to underline that the research relationship was established not only through our verbal communication (my questions and their answers) but also through non-verbal communication which was framed by emotional reflexivity. Throughout our encounters I celebrated their joys and commiserated with their sorrows as these fathers recounted what they regarded as their imperfect parenting experiences. Two participants began crying while they recounted particularly touching moments they shared with their children. These moments required a sensitive approach on my part, entailing some empathetic comforting, as managing each participant's comfort level formed part of my role as an ethical researcher but also a caring person¹. Jacqui Gabb underlined that the better the researcher understands and identifies with the interviewee's situation, the better the data is likely to be²⁵.

And yet, not all my interactions were positive. A couple of participants from the Romanian group tested me at the beginning of the encounter to check how trustworthy I was and find out any hidden motives I might have had for doing the study. One Romanian participant was careful in speaking to me because he believed that “Everything I say can be used against me”. I addressed his concern through empathy, clarifying the aims of my research and his voluntary participation, and offering understanding support. This emotional labour²⁶ produced a positive effect as some fathers reiterated that “I know this is confidential, this is why I am saying this (...)” as a sign that they understood their initial rights, but also that they allowed me into their world and that I had gained their trust. However, by giving fathers a voice, I was silencing mine, particularly during certain moments in our interactions where sexist remarks clashed with my emergent feminist ethic, a point I have elaborated elsewhere²⁷.

Emotions can pose a challenge to the positivist nature of the researcher’s role, something which has been much emphasized in the feminist literature¹. These challenges can be creative in that they help us imagine alternative research methods. Research on families, embedded in the relational and emotional can therefore enhance feminist methodology, just as much as it is reshaped by feminist perspectives as well. For example, visual listening helped to bring an embodied focus on the application of emotional reflexivity, and because of this it enhanced the concept beyond the reflective and discursive. Within the primarily rational paradigm demanded by rigorous research, it was therefore possible to incorporate embodiment and emotions.

Struggling with ‘objectivity’

In re-imagining the social world of involved fathers and carrying out the research, I found that the personal dissolved into the professional. The moments of emotional bordering which fathers were narrating, were also blending into the boundaries of the research. This sometimes frightened me, and I felt a need to keep it in check, but at other times it felt analytically useful to just let it occur. As I became aware of the fear and how my assumptions about the role of the researcher and that of the father, were tested during the emotional interviews, this process also re-positioned my positionality. Initially, I came into the field with views on gender that I thought were sufficiently open-minded but realized that these could expand even more; for example, I thought that conducting research on a positive topic would not be as challenging as other more difficult topics such as child abuse or divorce in the context of family life, but I was proven wrong. As a feminist researcher of family life, I constantly had to exercise my ‘emotionally reflexive muscle’.

I, and other family researchers, might struggle in such projects to deny our daughterly-selves and our memories of having fathers, particularly when we interview fathers. In her effort to integrate her own and her mother's experiences into a working-class landscape that refused to account for their experiences, Carolyn Steedman suggests: "We need a reading of history that reveals fathers mattering in a different way from the way they matter in the corpus of traditional psychoanalysis, the novels that depict the same familiar setting and in the bourgeois households of the fairy-tales"²⁸. To a large extent, this meant working against sameness and against attributing general characteristics to a group of men who happen to be fathers. It has been previously argued that "feminists taking an ethic of care approach assume inter-dependency"²⁹ in how they view personal relationships. However, my argument in this paper is that a feminist awakening is brought on by the research process itself. I was not fully aware of being a feminist researcher when I embarked on my doctoral project; my feminist consciousness was the result of the research process itself, coming to light as I reinterpreted childhood memories in combination with the analysis of the data in the present. As Maxine Birch and Tina Miller³⁰ have previously written, the interview can be a therapeutic encounter; while I agree, I add that this therapeutic encounter touch both participants and researcher. In my research I was made aware of the need to account for complex emotions in this research focus, which then led me to consider the value and relevance of some of the feminist approaches discussed in this paper, that challenge positivist qualitative research methods.

Sue Kelly³¹ described how the process of interviewing men has reshaped her feminist perspective as it made her become aware of her role in the patriarchal ordering of intimate relationships, where as a woman she found herself often disempowered, but as a researcher she could work against personal biases. In a similar manner my feminist awareness developed as I conducted the research. Reading through pivotal texts such as Barbara Risman's "Gender Vertigo"³² and bell hooks' "The will to change"³³ while interacting with fathers in our interviews, immersed me in a process of deep learning that incrementally began transforming my life and my relationship with the men in it, particularly how I came to understand my relationship with my own father. At the time of the research I was living away from my parents and undergoing a divorce, which created obstacles to the ways in which I was able to listen to involved fathers. For example, I was being particularly careful not to over-interpret certain episodes, but I was also silenced as mentioned above. In one interview, a Romanian middle-class father took control of the interview and began telling me that qualitative research is not relevant when compared to quantitative research and that maybe I should rethink my degree choice and how I am doing research. Instances such as these brought to the surface an anger which was also mirrored in the trying circumstances of my

personal life at the time. And again, I returned to bell hook³⁴'s work, which prompted me to put my anger into the writing, to integrate it constructively as part of the analytical process, through exercising emotional reflexivity. My field-notes are a testament to the frustration I experienced as a woman conducting this research, being reminded of my subordinate status, and how this conflicted with the intellectual joys I encountered in my role as a researcher, where I had a relative degree of power.

Connecting the personal with the professional

The carry-over between my professional interest and my personal experiences was difficult to ignore or catalogue as 'subjective bias'. Instead I maintain that it was precisely in becoming aware of these shifts and how my subjectivity had to be contained by demands of objective, academic rigour, that I employed emotional reflexivity and brought to light some of the more interesting analytical parts in the process of writing up my thesis. As part of this process I became aware of the many roles I inhabited which allowed me to not feel 'stuck' in simply one role. I could thereby write from a polyphonic perspective: as mentioned previously, I interacted with interviewees from my role as a woman, but also researcher, from that of guest but also as daughter³⁵. These various roles mirrored the variety of experiences that the involved fathers recounted from their own performances of fatherhood. They too played many different roles at work and at home, so there was an understanding established between us of our mutual effort and work in experiencing the social. These elements brought us together where there were other elements that separated us, such as gender and age. Moreover, if we were divided by their experience of having children compared to my childlessness, we shared in common the experience of having had parents.

Cynthia Enloe suggests that "one of the starting points of feminism is taking women's lives seriously"³⁶, and I agree, although I chose a different and less direct path to my feminist research project. Sara Ahmed³⁷ acknowledges that a variety of moments have the potential to become feminist ones. When I was training to become a psychologist, I came into contact with attachment theory, its unrealistic demands for intensive mothering, and its naturalized assumptions of embodied care and self-sacrifice. Concerned with this over-burdening of mothers, I started to turn my attention to the 'missing parent' in the conversation, the father, attributed until then in a Chodorowskian³⁸ sense, to a secondary socialization status. By taking men's emotional lives seriously, I could deconstruct how a group of fathers build an emotional identity that not only relies on restrictive emotionality³⁹ but can also contain love and other positive feelings associated with it.

To this extent and following Enloe again, I thought this was one of the many ways in which I could “throw into sharp relief the blatant and subtle political workings of both femininity and masculinity”⁴⁰. It is difficult to argue against love: therein lies the problematic aspect of love and its power. For involved fathers the child becomes the ultimate emotional project of the self rather than simply a project of the self. Through getting to know their child and experiencing love alongside a range of other emotions (anger, worry, sadness, joy etc.) involved fathers understand themselves differently in relation to others and to their role in society. This happens as they compare present experiences with past experiences, current emotional episodes with memories from interacting with their own parents and at the same time they create new experiences alongside their child and their romantic partner (for those who were coupled). A feminist approach⁴¹ was essential during fieldwork and data analysis, as I tried to remain simultaneously open to the learning experience but also critically aware⁴². Conclusively, I suggest that an emotionally careful and aware analysis, inspired by feminist methodologies and by an ethic of care, should feed into any qualitative data analysis, as it will influence the theoretical contributions of the research.

Multiple roles

I enacted many roles both professionally and personally as I conducted my doctoral research. My role as a Romanian woman working in a Scottish environment with the cultural fractures and adaptation I have experienced, contrasted with the role of a daughter living away from her family as my family and friends remained in Romania, a role which came with its own specific emotional and relational responsibilities as I tried to make Scotland my new ‘home’. These roles cannot be rehearsed by reading methodology textbooks before undertaking fieldwork. This is because they exist within a socio-psychological space where they are osmosed and are performed during the process of data collection and analysis; they are as such deeply personal. In this process I was carrying the unconscious role of the daughter into the research, but I also became a listener, an audience, a guest, and I unsuccessfully tried to remain detached from previous roles, as I thought that they were irrelevant to the research situation due to my training and education as a researcher. A positivist approach demands objectivity, precision, and efficiency, seeing researchers as technicians of the research process rather than embedded parts and participants within it. The academic demand to slice objectively through these roles in combination with adapting to the demands of a different class identity and different cultural rules about expressing emotions, affected my mental health as I was conducting the research.

Surpassing emotional demands

Researching families can be demanding work, as it is not only a rational endeavor to comprehend a social phenomenon or set of subjective experiences, but also an exercise in healing the researcher's own family experiences, replete with traumas, power relations and unconscious dynamics produced in specific class locations and in the formation of a gender identity. As I was transcribing the interviews, I was undergoing an emotional re-evaluation of my relationship to love and to the parenting I had received (from both my father and my mother). I felt that a personal analysis interfered unpleasantly with my researcher's role, because I continued to have expectations of objectivity, of neatly divided lines between personal and theoretical experiences. Eventually, I had to seek professional counselling to continue to write. The anger that surfaced from realizing the conditions of my own oppression blocked my writing, and I needed to find someone who could help me to make sense of what I was researching. I needed a mirroring not with my participants but with a detached professional. Untying the discursive knots of my participants' experiences, accessing their truths and being able to represent them accurately, required deeper emotional work than I envisaged. In the process of receiving counselling, I overcame the writer's block through the 'talking cure' and long sessions of art which reminded me of the creative potential inherent in a journey of both emotional and intellectual discovery. When I returned to my research, I reviewed love, in its romantic and parental form, and its meaning in my life and work.

Learning to feel differently

At the same time, I was learning how to 'feel middle-class' as my education and training were preparing me for a life that was different class-wise to the one I had experienced growing up. In addition, undergoing therapy was part of the process of becoming well-adapted to the emotional demands of British culture, which was very different to the Romanian culture in which I had grown up. It was the act of learning the feeling rules⁴³ of a new culture. This is not to say that I recommend undergoing therapy as part of a 'good' researcher's professional skill set. I simply underline that as I was immersed in the process of writing about other people's family lives, I faced writer's block due to the ongoing recollection of childhood memories. It certainly helped me to talk about my strong emotions with a professional, and most importantly it helped me write. Writing, to my mind, is liberating, as one is actively working against his or her conditions of oppressions. bell hooks emphasized in her book *Talking back*⁴⁴, that growing into a feminist awareness releases an anger related to the realization of injustice, that can be most productive (and politically significant) if transferred into writing.

To represent the voices of these 47 involved fathers, I had to find my own feminist voice and be courageous and curious enough to attach myself emotionally to my participants and their narratives when needed, and then detach from them emotionally as I was analyzing their narratives. However, I did not achieve a complete separation of the two, no matter how much I tried to do so to achieve ‘objectivity’. For example, it was difficult for me to see a couple of middle-class men cry. In the literature I was reading at the time, they were portrayed as the privileged class⁴⁵, and in my role as a working-class female researcher I was forming codes based on the language of a privileged group in relation to another more familiar and less privileged, that of working-class involved fathers. And yet when recounting experiences of feeling grateful for being loved by their children or feeling underserving or that in some way they failed them, this brought tears to their eyes. I started to think that I was perhaps looking for differences where there might be more similarities. Of course, I remained aware of middle-class fathers’ potential displays of overwhelming emotions as part of the performance of a socially likeable image, but I couldn’t simply disregard the liminal stage where emotionally there were many parallels between my experiences, and those of both the working-class and middle-class fathers.

Owning the feminist role

As I was writing up my thesis, there was an ethical imperative I used to remind myself of – both as a researcher and the person I had become – and that was to write from the heart. I continue to believe this imperative has kept the demands of academic rigour and the emotional attachment to my research in a necessary equilibrium; it also kept me meaningfully motivated to withstand the pressure on writing to a deadline. I owe a debt in my writing and thinking as a feminist to bell hooks,⁴⁶ who was among the few who looked at and described the uncomfortable connections between masculinity and love, and how they shape our social relationships. In “The Will to love” she recounts the difficult relationship she shared with her father and brought this into a wider understanding of the fragility and violence of gendered relationships as they are under the pressure of certain norms of being, of existing and of feeling. Reading her text during my research shifted my attention to my own relationship to my father, particularly as I was faced at every conference I attended with the daunting personal question “So what brought you to study this topic?”

Without attempting a psychoanalytical investigation of my inner world and affective needs, I can say that my father’s life has instilled in me – long before I knew I was a sociologist – an interest in gender relationships, masculinity, culture and power. Undoubtedly, my father’s Romanian working-class, self-taught, post-collectivist and urban masculine identity deeply influenced my

interest in gender and culture, in ways that remained unknown to me until the moment I started my doctoral research. Receiving an education moved me from superficial to deep learning⁴⁷ and brought to the surface some recollections of my childhood. While working towards my PhD, I underwent a personal and emotional transformation, which changed the way I understood the topic I was investigating. For example, my father's life-long observed conflict between a stoic emotional identity – often defended by outright aggression – and his moments of love and care for me, my sister and my mother, was a dichotomy I re-encountered during the 47 interviews. Julia Brannen⁴⁸ described how fathers experience ambivalence in assuming their parental role and how family 'attachment wounds' are passed down inter-generationally and reproduced in the present in intimate interactions. Therefore, it is not only in the lives of our participants but also in our lives as researchers that conscious and unconscious aspects emerge which determine our academic pursuits and need to be acknowledged.

In "Living a feminist life", Sara Ahmed writes:

The personal is theoretical. Theory itself is often assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life. To abstract is to drag away, detach, pull away, or divert. We might then have to drag theory back, to bring theory back to life.⁴⁹

Research can have transformative effects on one's identity. Sometimes, in the process of writing up you lay the building blocks for who you are becoming, who you want to be and have chosen to be, as a writer, an educator, a researcher, and an individual who values something others might not; therefore in adopting an emotional and relational approach to the study of family lives, connections to one's own family are brought up and this has a broader transformative appeal. This process is indeed daunting. Small achievements are underscored by failures. Emotional experiences become fodder for theoretical reflections. Sometimes it feels like a recollection of your childhood, at other times like visiting an old museum and discovering long-forgotten artefacts. In more troubling moments it feels like a mental health issue when emotions are hard to grasp and interpret logically, as they tend to overwhelm the neat confines of academic writing. What complicates matters is that, seeing my research through a social-constructionist frame, I struggled with the ideology of 'feminism', because I was aware that it too is a socially constructed and situated form of knowledge, sometimes perceived as a disruptive force for social relationships, as something that seemed to complicate intimate connections. Again, as Ahmed explains:

Feminism: it can be a strain. This strain is evident as tension in this text, sometimes revealed as a confusion of pronouns and persons; a tension between telling my own story of becoming a feminist, (...) and making more general reflections about worlds (...)50

If I was struggling with the (gendered) interpretation of the social world, with devising my own voice and language, and if I was resisting the process of deep learning that overcame me during my doctoral research, then it was only because I was already in the process of growing into and embodying my feminist role. This role comes with a number of challenges and continues to receive backlash in its struggle to be included in the gender mainstream51.

Conclusion

To research men, particularly a sample of 47 White European fathers, is to come in contact with a social group who upholds many of the privileges that other marginalized groups (Brown or Black European men for example) or subordinated groups (European women from different marginalized backgrounds) continue to be denied. It means to encounter the embodiment of the gendered power which shapes the social world in persisting unequal ways, even if in some cultures this happens more overtly and visibly than in others. However, this means also encountering the agency of individuals who have different levels of awareness of their power and privilege, different kinds of social capital and diverse social backgrounds. Families are deeply inter-related with the classed and cultural environments which produce them¹ (and which they also help maintain) and are linked to social institutions by what Sara Ahmed¹ has called an ‘affective stickiness’. This means that affects sustain the connection between ideas, values and resources. By expanding this to emotions, then the concept of ‘stickiness’ presupposes that there are no separations between values and ideas, and values usually find their roots in the researcher’s family biography. Therefore, it is my view that love is a deeply ‘sticky’ emotion which creates relationships (that can be problematic) where otherwise there would be borders and separations.

Individuals who love experience themselves as multidimensional, rather than singular. In being a constitutive part of the family, people usually assess their family relationships, reflect on their past and their childhood, to maintain the relationships they share with their family members in the present. In these unseen and intimate ways, they are ‘doing family’¹. It is however, not always obvious that this is a profoundly emotional process.

It has been argued that love’s power has a gender⁵², its expression a certain class⁵³, its roots springing forth from the intricate enmeshment with others during childhood experiences⁵⁴. I

argue that to write about love is to develop a form of writing that not only represents, describes and critically assesses but also *imagines*, and can offer a vocabulary that frames what is novel in the ongoing similar reproduction of family relationships and close intimate ties. Emotional and intellectual developments gained in one part of life, can be interchangeably used in another. In this way, growing confidence in utilizing emotions and different ways of listening, might preserve in academic research the fluid and complex emotional connections which individuals experience in their everyday interactions, and vice versa.

The many feminist thinkers who have inspired my research, such as bell hooks, Caroline Ramanazoglu and Janet Holland and Andrea Doucet, have long been interested in methodological practices that challenge the objective role of the researcher, or researcher's detachment, allow for contradictory interpretations of research, and acknowledge the ways in which emotion enters the research process. In this paper, by writing in first person and employing emotional reflexivity in a discussion of my father, I have shown how integrating an analysis of emotion in the study of family lives forms part of a larger feminist epistemology. Family methodologies such as the ones employed by David Morgan, Jacqui Gabb and Carol Smart can also benefit from feminist perspectives by critically engaging with gendered matters in the analysis of emotions and embodiment, as exemplified above through visual listening. Therefore, the links between family and feminist methodologies might not be as separate as imagined, just as the connection between reason and emotions is not a dichotomous one, but rather a mutually-constitutive process. Therefore, investigating complex emotions in family relationships entails a type of qualitative logics⁵⁵ that is essentially an *emotional* logic.

Feminist thinkers have long had a tradition of pointing out the problematic aspects of family life⁵⁶, and they have helped bring into the debate the many different forms of love and family formations which exist in the social world⁵⁷. In this way, a feminist lens which argues for inclusion and diversity, and contests the divide between public and private lives can help us understand how to design methodologies to study the experiences of family members at the cross-roads of these realms, and record complex social changes, such as migratory work and long-distance family arrangements⁵⁸. Capturing this fluidity in sociological analyses is the challenge that remains for future projects which look at love between family members in the realm of personal life.

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¹ (Shapiro and Shapiro, 2004).

² (Rutter et al. 2007; Mardare, 2015).

³ (Ellingson, 2017).

⁴ (Holmes, 2010 and Brownlie, 2014 who both build upon Ian Burkitt's work).

⁵ According to Mary Holmes (2010) reflexivity is "(...) an emotional, embodied, and cognitive process in which social actors have feelings about and try to understand and alter their lives in relation to their social and natural environment to others" (p.140).

⁶ (Freedman, 2001).

⁷ (Smart, 2007).

⁸ (1988).

⁹ (2014).

¹⁰ (Hochschild, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2014).

¹¹ (2012).

¹² (see Smart, 2007; Gabb, 2008).

¹³ (Dermott, 2008).

¹⁴ Out of the 47 interviewees, 35 identified as middle-class and 12 as working-class; the age range was between 28 and 56 years of age, and while the majority were resident (lived in the same house as their children), 6 were non-resident (did not live in the same house as their children due to legal arrangements or separations); 33 men were married, 7 co-partnered, and 7 were either divorced or separated; 41 fathers had one or two children, while 6 fathers had three or more children.

15 (Macht, 2017).
16 (1993).
17 (2004).
18 (Dermott, 2008; Doucet, 2013; Hochschild, 2003; Gabb, 2008)
19 (Shields, 2002).
20 (Featherstone, 1999).
21 (Sprague and Kobrynowicz, 1999).
22 (Gabb, 2008).
23 (2007).
24 (Ellingson, 2017).
25 (2010).
26 Emotional labour is a term coined by Arlie Hochschild and was explained in her book “The managed heart” (1989) as the relational labour expected from women and sold in return for resources.

27 (Macht, 2018).
28 (1986, p.19).
29 (Gillies, 2003, p.13).
30 (2000).
31 (2011).
32 (1998).
33 (2004).
34 (2014).
35 (see Steedman, 1986 and Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989)
36 (p.3, 2004).
37 (2017).
38 This term is based on Nancy Chodorowsky’s work ‘The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender’ published in 1978, which proved to be influential in making an argument for the psycho-social experiences of boys and girls as having distinct gender experiences as they were socialized in the family. The mothers were conceived of as the primary socialization agents, while fathers and other relatives were secondary socialization agents.
39 (Jansz, 2000).
40 (p.4, 2004).
41 (Ramanazoglu and Holland, 2002; hooks, 2004).
42 (Latimer and Skeggs, 2011).
43 (Hochschild, 1989).
44 (2014).
45 I was deeply immersed in Raewynn’s Connell’s, Michael Kimmel’s and Andrew Tolson’s works at the time.
46 (2004).
47 (Briggs, 1986).
48 (2015).
49 (p.10, 2017).
50 (Ahmed, 2017, p.14)
51 (Browne, 2012).
52 (hooks, 2004).
53 (Johson and Lawler, 2005).
54 (Hollway, 2007).
55 (Silverman, 1997).
56 (Jamieson et al., 2011).
57 (Jonasdottir and Ferguson, 2014).

⁵⁸ (Choi and Peng, 2015).