Abstract: Ivy Compton-Burnett is a little-known writer whose novels about family life should be essential reading for anyone interested in relations of power in families. This paper takes those novels as a starting point for reflecting on methodological issues that arise when working with data that offer multiple perspectives on one family. I am part way through a PhD that considers negotiation of domestic labour in families with teenage kids. My study is based on confidential, in-depth interviews with four or five members of each family. Reading the transcripts from this study is like reading the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett: in both, accounts from each family member can be seen as situated in the context of their family culture. The paper outlines a typology for thinking about analysis of data from multiple perspectives, devised by UK sociologists Jane McCarthy, Janet Holland and Val Gillies. I propose an approach to analysis for the current study that draws on the work of Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith. I argue that considering people’s accounts in the context of their family culture enables us to see people as situated actors, and invites us to consider how relations of power are enacted in their everyday lives.

This paper considers methodological issues arising from a study of negotiation of domestic labour in families with teenage kids. I observe that reading the transcripts from this study is like reading the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett: in both, accounts from each family member can be seen as situated in the context of their family culture. The paper outlines a typology for thinking about analysis of data that offer multiple perspectives on one family, and proposes an approach to analysis for the current study.

Ivy Compton-Burnett

Ivy Compton-Burnett is a most insightful, compassionate and neglected writer whose nineteen novels of family life - written almost entirely in dialogue - should be essential reading for anyone interested in relations of power in families. The novels focus on the
details of family life. They illustrate the creation of meaning in interaction between family members, and invite the reader to see family dynamics as an exercise of power between situated actors (for a brief introduction see Spurling 1998).

In the novels individuals voice different perspectives on how the family is and how it should be. People’s views reflect ideas about the capacities of and behaviour appropriate to women and men, and to people of different classes. Material considerations are important: who controls the assets that generate income for the family has a significant effect on how the contest between stories is played out. In each of Ivy’s novels is a tyrant, who exercises power in the family to pursue her or his own interests at the expense of others. The actions of the tyrant are contested, acquiesced to and commented on by others who have less power in the household.

In her work Ivy drew from experience. The sixth of twelve children, as a child and young woman she had experienced tyranny at the hands of her widowed mother. After her death Ivy become the family tyrant, and exercised power over her siblings. In an interview in 1960 (at the age of 76) she said, ‘I think there’s always a tendency for power to be misused. Nothing’s more corrupting than power. Very few people stand it I think’ (Bowen 1979:169). In the novels the portraits are clear sighted, humorous and informed by compassion. Ivy saw people as ‘morally the same and intellectually different’ (Spurling 1984:259). She is one for whom to know all is to forgive all.
The novels offer little or no interpretation of what people say. For Ivy ‘appearances are all we have’, and in the novels appearances are speech (Hutchinson 1979:184). It is left to the reader to impute motivation or feeling to the characters, and to identify and theorise about the power relations enacted in those everyday lives. The novels read like transcripts. They invite sociological analysis just as transcripts do.

The Study

I am part way through a PhD project looking at the way domestic labour is negotiated in families with teenage kids. I have conducted in-depth interviews with two parents and two or three teenage children in ten families. Transcribing the interviews I felt as if Ivy novels were appearing through my fingers.

Interviews are confidential and provide room for participants to reflect on how domestic labour happens in their families. I use a broad definition of domestic labour, encompassing housework tasks, planning and organizing, and the emotion work of looking out for people’s feelings and keeping everything running smoothly (Carter 2003:2). For each aspect of domestic labour I ask what gets done, who does what, is it fair, and how do you think it should be. I ask adults what they learned about domestic labour in their families of origin and in share houses, and I ask kids about how they would like domestic labour to be organized when they are adults.

In a way, my topic is a Trojan horse. It has proved to be a window into many aspects of family life. The families’ accounts show a great diversity that exists within a sample that
is similar in terms of demographics. The most striking feature of my data is that they show people’s stories as situated. I want to use my data in a way that will make good use of the multiple perspectives they offer.

**Using Data From Multiple Perspectives**

UK sociologists Jane McCarthy, Janet Holland and Val Gillies (2003:5) noted that while various studies have used data that represent multiple perspectives on one family, few researchers have described the choices involved in approaching their analysis. Most have presented analyses based on the standpoints of gender or generation. While some studies have exploited the benefits of multiple perspectives in a limited way, the possibilities for analysis of such data have rarely been fully realized.

McCarthy et al. (2003:7) propose a typology that describes a range of ways that such data might be considered. This has four categories, organized around two axes. The horizontal axis they describe as ‘objectivist / interpretivist’: concerned with ‘facts’, on one side, and with people’s interpretations on the other. The vertical axis represents the extent to which accounts in a family are similar to or different from each other. So the four categories are: ‘facts’ are confirmed, ‘facts’ are disputed, themes and concepts are the same, and themes and concepts are different. An additional ‘blurry’ category at the centre is identified as ‘same story different versions’: seeing accounts from different perspectives as describing the same events, but from different points of view.
This typology shows different ways we might think about data. McCarthy et al. (2003:8) favour an interpretivist approach. They note that the typology does not identify the role of the researcher in creating, selecting and interpreting the data. It is the researcher who makes comparisons across accounts and makes sense of gaps, silences and contradictions. Even a study concerned with ‘facts’ is a process of interpretation.

McCarthy et al. (2003:16) note that gaps and contradictions become visible when we compare accounts from different family members. They observe that researchers generally take accounts that are consistent with each other to mean that those accounts are true. We assume that ‘agreed’ means ‘accurate’. Data from multiple perspectives
invite the question: How far does an agreed account reflect what happens in the family, and how far is it rooted in a 'family script'?

A related question is: When we have pieced together a group of consistent stories from within one family have we identified the presence of a ‘family culture’? McCarthy et al. (2003:16-18) argue that we can see stories as representing family culture, or we can see them as being about gender, generation, class or ethnicity. Using their own research as an example they conclude that different ways of looking at data yield different forms of knowledge, as ‘each twisting of the analytic kaleidoscope brings different issues into focus’ (McCarthy et al. 2003:19).

McCarthy et al. (2003:20) discuss the difficulties involved in presenting analysis based on family culture. In the main report from their own study using data from multiple perspectives, they presented the analysis on the basis of standpoint - gender and generation - not family. They note that while seeing accounts in the context of family culture is very revealing, family cultures become visible only after careful and lengthy analysis. There is often not room to present this in a sociological paper.

Analysis based on family culture does not lend itself to elegant sociological storytelling. It is untidy and may be open to multiple readings. McCarthy et al. (2003:20) argue that there should be scope to present data in a less tidy way to academic audiences in order to make these readings visible.
Situated Actors And Family Culture

Analysis in terms of family culture offers the opportunity to see people as situated actors, creating meaning in interaction with each other. The concept of situated actor comes from Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith. Smith (1999:7) is interested in the way relations of power are enacted ‘in people’s actual practices in the local settings of their everyday lives’. A researcher is also a situated actor. Who and where we are will determine what we look for, and what we see (Smith 1990:22).

Smith (1999:129) argued that sociological concepts are indexical, in that they take their meaning from the situations in which people’s everyday experience is enacted. Reading data from my study I feel that people’s accounts are indexical also, in this sense: they take their meaning from their context. Stories people tell about the way domestic labour happens in their families are imbued with meaning in relation to the context of their family culture.

Most people in an interview tell a story of their family as better than most, as doing OK. They create ‘morally adequate accounts’ that present a positive front to the researcher, and are grounded in values that they assume the researcher shares (Jordan et al. 1994:73). People refer to various cultural logics to create accounts where what they say about what they think matches what they say about what they do (Hays 1996:133). In my data I see cultural logics such as essentialist beliefs about the nature and capacities of women and men, and ideas about what it is to be a good parent, or a good child. People refer to a
range of different values about what makes a ‘good’ family. The same values may be invoked to support very different choices (Jordan et al. 1994:146).

**Adapting McCarthy Et Al’s Typology**

My data are people’s accounts of their family lives, that were created in interaction with me, the researcher, in an interview setting. They are stories about what people do and what people think. In the typology devised by McCarthy et al., the axis called ‘facts or interpretation’ becomes for me ‘stories about behaviour’ and ‘stories about ideas’. For each family I can unpack the accounts into four categories: where stories about behaviour are consistent; where stories about behaviour differ; where stories about ideas are consistent; and where stories about ideas differ. I find this a useful place to begin.

Stories about ideas are usually more interesting than stories about behaviour. The ‘who does what’ aspects of domestic labour have been well researched in Australia, and the patterns that appear in my study are generally consistent with those seen in ABS data (for example Bittman 2003). Inconsistencies between family members’ accounts of who does what are revealing, and are usefully considered in relation to accounts of ideas about how things are - for example the ‘is it fair’ question - and ideas about how things should be.

What people say they think about how domestic labour happens in their family can be more surprising. Where accounts about what people think are consistent, these could be seen to represent a ‘family myth’, a shared set of ideas about how the family is and the values it runs on. Areas where accounts about what people think are different reflect
differing ideas about how the family could be better. Data that appear in this quadrant are often the most interesting of all, representing contested accounts of how things do or should happen.

The concept of ‘families we live by or families we live with’, is useful here. The ‘family we live by’ is the ideal of what we think our family is or how we choose to represent it to ourselves or to others. The ‘family we live with’ is the messy everyday experience, that does not always match the ideal. Carol Smart (2004) used this concept in her analysis of a UK study of families as defined by generation rather than as based around couples. Her research showed that the image and the practices of family may be quite different from each other, and still coexist in our accounts and our experience with little sense of contradiction. This mismatch is evident in the accounts generated by my study.

It is here that the transcripts most resemble Ivy novels. None of my families has a tyrant like Ivy’s, but the transcripts tell a story about the dynamic of power relations in the families. Different views about how things should be can be seen as being asserted, contested, negotiated and acquiesced to in each family. Considering these accounts in relation to stories about who does what everyday work gives a rich impression of how the family happens.

In the typology devised by McCarthy et al. the category in the centre is described as ‘same story different versions’. I see this differently. This is the space where the researcher pieces together an overall story based on her interpretation of individuals’
accounts of the family. The researcher creates a story of the ‘family culture’. Family culture here is not something that is inherent in the family that the researcher objectively observes. It is a story the researcher creates in her reading of the accounts given by family members.

This way of thinking about family culture suggests an approach to analysis for my own study.

**An Approach To Analysis**

I want to use my data in a way that allows people’s accounts to be seen as situated in the context of their family culture. Finding a way to do this may involve some trial and error. I propose to start like this.

For each family, analysis begins with three steps. First, I introduce the family and describe their interaction with me. Next, I identify family members’ accounts in terms of the four categories described above. Where family members’ accounts differ, setting these out will be lengthy but I think it is essential. Then, I make an interpretation of those accounts based on my reading of the family culture in which they are situated.

The story I tell about family culture will consider ways in which different views and behaviours are asserted, resisted and negotiated in the family. It will identify beliefs about women and men, parents and children, paid work, domestic work and schooling, and think about the broader cultural logics to which these refer. It will consider the ways
in which different kinds of beliefs are effective in legitimating or resisting different types of behaviour.

The analysis may go on to consider themes that arise in the families’ accounts in terms of standpoint, such as gender, generation, or class. Any such discussion will be grounded in the context of family culture. Working this way we can see the concepts we theorize with as taking their meaning from the situated practice of people’s everyday experience.

To make this approach work, data should be presented so that the reader can identify the views of each family member. It should always be clear where the discussion is referring to a view expressed by a particular family member (or members), and where it refers to the researcher’s interpretation of those views. Writing this way allows the reader to distinguish the researcher’s interpretation (the map) from the data (the territory), and to generate other interpretations of their own. As Smith argued,

"There are and must be different experiences of the world and different bases of experience. We must not do away with them by taking advantage of our privileged speaking to construct a sociological version that we then impose on them as their reality. We may not rewrite the other’s world or impose upon it a conceptual framework that extracts from it what fits with ours. Their reality is the place from which inquiry begins (Smith 1990:25)."

**Writing Sociology**

McCarthy et al. (2003:10) note that ‘researchers seem to feel an almost overwhelming need to resolve the different versions of reality and to tell one coherent, rounded story or
set of findings from the different accounts they may have heard'. Researchers tell coherent stories with good reason. Simple, elegant stories read better and are more persuasive than accounts that are open to a range of interpretations. Real life is more untidy than this, and data that give accounts of one family from multiple perspectives can be very untidy. People’s experiences of families are messier than ‘one coherent, rounded story’ might suggest.

Analysis that considers people’s accounts in the context of their family culture will be an effective way to realize the potential of the data generated by my study. These will not be short or simple stories, but I believe they will be worth the effort. I hope that reading my analyses will be like pondering the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett.

References


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