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Swapping stories: comparing plots.
Representing multiple perspectives in family interviews

Jo Warin
Yvette Solomon
Charlie Lewis

Abstract
Issues relating to the trustworthiness of research narratives are particularly relevant for those family researchers who attempt to interpret, legitimate and represent comparative accounts of family life collected from different family members within the same family unit. We discuss these issues with reference to research we have carried out with fifty-seven family groups. In confronting the analysis that emerges from a process of comparison and combining differing perspectives we ask: Whose story are we telling? This question raises deeper epistemological problems regarding the 'crisis of representation' in social research. We argue for a resolution of the crisis by the adoption of a post-positivist position in which we are clear that the emerging interpretation and representation of our disparate and complex data set is our story. Furthermore, we argue that we need to incorporate ourselves within our emerging narrative, bringing a 'strong objectivity' to bear on our interpretation (Harding 1993).

Introduction
The postmodernist 'crisis of representation' has been discussed by Denzin (1997) as well as others (for example Goodson and Sikes: 2001, Pring: 2000) and refers to the essential question about the researcher's claims to represent reality: Does the research represent an empirical reality that exists independently of the researcher or is it a construction? Denzin discusses the interrelated crises of representation, legitimation and praxis, problematising the traditional criteria for judging the trustworthiness of research outcomes such as validity, generalizability and reliability. He asks 'how are qualitative studies to be evaluated in the contemporary, poststructural moment?' (p. 4). This crisis is writ large for family researchers as dissonant accounts are likely to be elicited from different family members. As Perlesz and Lindsay (2003) suggest, this dissonance in the data is likely to arise due to both the multi-faceted and intimate nature of the family context. While it provides an opportunity for validating accounts as a form of triangulation, it also presents a threat, as the complexity becomes unwieldy.

Ribbens McCarthy, Holland and Gillies (2003), have also carried out interviewing in family clusters and raise similar issues. They portray this crisis of representation as lying on a continuum between objectivist and interpretavist positions. At the objectivist extreme is the aim to gain a more valid overview of the 'realities' of the family, based on the belief that the researcher can glimpse an authenticity that exists apart from her/him

and gain insight into the ways the family acts when s/he is not present. This is the 'naïve realist' position (Guba and Lincoln:1994, Pring: 2000). At the other extreme is the struggle to represent the validity of each account as the subjective reality of the individual, an approach that values and legitimates the voices of the research participants. Ribbens McCarthy et al, suggest, quoting Harding (1990), that a middle position is to try to tell 'less false stories' rather than trying to tell one true story, suggesting the need for an 'increasing distance from falsity rather than closeness to truth' (p. 100). In this their position is very similar to the position adopted by Perlesz and Lindsey (2003) who describe their approach as post-positivist, a position that Hammersley (1992) has also advocated.

The post-positivist position is a middle position between, on the one hand, an extreme positivism which holds there is a knowable empirical reality that research aims to represent, and on the other, a relativist constructionism which holds that all accounts are socially constructed and equally valid, no one of them being a 'better' claim to knowledge than another. This position recognises that pure objectivity is unattainable, and that we cannot represent an empirical reality but that some claims have greater validity than others: "reality does exist but can never be perfectly apprehended" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 29). Fay (1975) adopts this approach in his concept of 'adequacy' in interpretation, which he describes as the constant questioning and challenging of a description which brings about the production of ever more adequate re-descriptions. Research conducted in this paradigm aims to present a more elaborated interpretation: 'through a hermeneutic dialectic process, a new construction will emerge that is not "better" or "truer" than its predecessors, but simply more informed and sophisticated' (Guba and Lincoln,1994, p.17). A vital constituent of this more informed construction is researcher reflexivity, the researcher's recognition of their own influence in developing this construction, an influence that is acknowledged to exist at every stage of the research process. Researcher reflexivity is a crucial strategy in fulfilling the criteria for a post-positivist 'adequate', 'least false' analysis.

It is worth noting at this point that the term 'post-positivism' which we have adopted from Perlesz and Lindsey, has close parallels to the more established position of critical realism (Bhaskar,1998; Collier,1994). The advantage of a post-positivist, or critical realist, position for our purposes is that it suggests that it is worth struggling to present a coherent analysis, our story, that can contain the multiple perspectives, contradictions and complexities of our data rather than adopting the relativist position of extreme post modernism in which we would be merely acting as a cipher for the cacophony of voices of our research participants, passing them on in an unanalysed form. Yet the complexity of the analytic task in producing our story is almost overwhelming.

In this paper we aim to provide a grounded illustration of our process of developing our story which has entailed a continuing confrontation with methodological and epistemological questions. The story itself can be read in two closely related reports: Warin et al. (1998), and Langford et al. (2001). The starting point of our argument is the problematic nature of analysing and making sense of multiple perspectives from family members which convey divergent interpretations. In facing this challenge we set out to

construct the least false account. A key feature of this post-positivist undertaking is to incorporate researcher reflexivity since we can only recognise the divergence between interpretations when we can position ourselves within the social interactions that have produced this divergence. Consequently we need to focus on the positions adopted by interviewer and interviewee in relation to each other during the course of the construction of each account. What transpires is a sequence of positioning and repositioning.

Collecting data from families

We begin by presenting some necessary background information on the aims and principle methods of the research study. Its focus was the nature of understandings about the role of the father in families with teenagers and an exploration of the meanings that are attributed to the family and of the practices through which the family is enacted. We were very much aware of the limitations of previous family research which has frequently been restricted to seeking the views of only one sub-group within the family, usually mothers. We were in agreement with Finch and Mason (1993), who suggest that seeing the family through the eyes of one member gives us a distorted picture of the family and the meanings that its members attribute to their roles, responsibilities and relationships. We wanted to expand on the approach pioneered by Bernard (1972) in which she sought to compare 'His and Her' approaches to marriage. A number of family researchers have since developed the comparative approach, sometimes focusing on gender differences and sometimes on generational differences within the family. Ribbens McCarthey et al (2003) give an overview of such research. In this study we compared the perspectives of mothers, fathers and their teenaged children in fifty-seven 'families' ranging from a family group of two (single parent mother and son) to a family group of six (mother, father, and four children within the target age group).

The methodological decision to access and piece together the different perspectives of a group of family members reflects and is reflected in our theoretical approach to understanding the nature of the family since questions about methodological approaches to family research are interdependent with theoretical questions about its nature. We chose to follow the lead of family theorists such as Morgan (1998) and Smart and Neale (1999) who recognise that the family is not a homogenous unit but a group of individuals co-existing in complex and fluid relationships with each other. This approach reinforces the view that we would not expect to unearth a unified family reality. For these reasons it was appropriate to select methods based on the classic observation of 'divergent realities' (Larson and Richards, 1994) in the experiences of adolescents and their parents. Consequently, in our interviews with mothers, fathers, and their children, we sought to gain their perspectives on the same events (for example daily household activities such as helping with homework). We also asked respondents to take on the perspective of the other targeted family members, and to try to imagine what the other would say. This procedure allows an insight into the pattern of relationships within each family and into each individual's construction of their own constellation of relationships.

The location of the study was an ex-industrial town in the North West of England. We conducted one-to-one interviews with fathers, mothers and target teenagers aged eleven

to sixteen. The sample represented a diversity of social backgrounds and work patterns[i]. Interviews were conducted in the family's home, usually with the researcher or sometimes two researchers interviewing individual respondents in as private an environment as could be found. Interviews lasted between half an hour and two hours with one hour fifteen minutes being the average duration. The research team who undertook this study were a group of four: one male, three female. Three were parents. Interviews were analysed using QSR NUDIST across six main nodes. For a fuller description see Warin et al (1999), and Langford et al. (2001)[ii]

One story or many? Whose story is it?

The method belongs to the research paradigm that sees the interview as the production of a narrative and which is therefore concerned with the relationship between the storyteller and their audience, which in turn invokes self presentation issues, and concerns about overall narrative coherence.

How do researchers produce an account which is complex enough to contain the multiplicities, contradictions and inconsistencies that exist in the data obtained in this kind of research? How can they produce the 'least false' story which we have argued, is the aim of post-positivist researchers? Gillies, Ribbens McCarthy and Holland have conducted interviews in families using a very similar methodology (Gillies et al. 2001: Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2003). The arising methodological issues are discussed specifically by Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) who ask: 'Are we obliged to construct one overall story, or should we take a more postmodern position, leaving loose threads and contradictions?' (p. 20). They conclude that the researcher's account needs to reflect complexity and multiplicity rather than attempting to produce one overall story but they recognise that this conclusion is problematic: "How this multiplicity and contradiction is then conveyed by the researcher opens up a whole new set of questions" (p.20). In this paper we explore this implied set of questions. We will examine how researchers produce an account from their data which is complex enough to contain the multiplicities and contradictions and inconsistencies that are uncovered by this kind of research. We will argue that it is the role of research to synthesise competing interpretations of events presenting the most 'adequate', 'least false' interpretation rather than attempting to present a relativist set of competing interpretations and leaving it up to the research audience to choose between these. We will argue therefore that we should aim to construct an overall story, and moreover a story that is quite clearly recognised as <u>our</u> story, one in which we the researchers, are ourselves positioned and accounted for.

Our starting point is to ask a set of questions that are closely related to these issues about the representation of complexity. These concern the ownership of the research outcome - that is to say the narrative. Who is authoring the story? The researcher? The research team? The researched? The funders? These are not only questions about the construction of the narrative during the interview but also about influences on the research outcome from the very beginnings of the research process through to the production of a written report. The narrative is constructed during initial discussion between researchers, through accessing existing research, in negotiations between researchers and funders, in

arrangements with respondents, during the interview interaction, during analysis of data by members of the research team, and finally within a written form for specific policy makers, practitioners, or academic audiences. The story, or analysis, is a co-construction produced through this sequence of interactions.

In order to understand a family and to present a rich, informed and sophisticated synthesis of their accounts, fulfilling the post-positivist aim that we have stressed above, we need to examine the interview as a whole in terms of the desires, aims and agendas that both parties bring to bear during the course of the interview. An important part of our argument, that researchers should produce an overall story, is that we recognise that we ourselves are party to, or part of, that story. A vital ingredient of the post-positivist position is a researcher reflexivity, which shows how the data is influenced through the mutual positioning, the power play and the developing human relationship between the researcher and the interviewee. This approach has been advocated consistently within the feminist research tradition and is argued most persuasively in Harding's exposition of the concept of 'strong objectivity' (1993) in which she turns the traditional positivist value for objectivity on its head in order to emphasise the need for reflexivity: paradoxically we gain more distance from the research process by exploring our own influences within it. Adopting this value for 'strong objectivity' we now want to take a close look at the developing relationship that takes place between researcher and respondent during an interview and observe how this relationship mediates the data that are collected.

Mutual Positioning

When we look closely at the sequence of interaction that takes place during an interview we recognise a sub text in which both interview participants are concerned with positioning themselves and the other. Generally this positioning and repositioning occurs tacitly and there are not always overt clues about the nature of this process. Sometimes however, interviews contain more explicit reference to these concerns of mutual positioning as for example our interview with Bob Dale (father) which illustrates these claims (at a number of points). Our interviews with the four members of the Dale family (father, mother and two sons) were arranged through our contact with Joan Dale (mother). During the course of his interview, Bob's comments show that he is struggling to position the interviewer, to work out what she is doing there and to position himself in response. He begins the interview in quite a hostile vein suggesting that the family interviews are interfering in the important family ritual of the evening meal.

> *Bob: I mean we would have our meal and we always have a meal sat round the table, but it doesn't look like we're going to get that tonight. But....*
>
> *R: I know, I'm sorry, I'm not quite sure that that's going to happen tonight.*
>
> *Bob: Um, which seems to be not so much done these days but is something that we do every night.*

This comment positions the interviewer as a nuisance and himself as a 'traditionalist' – a word he uses twice. He then raises his own agenda strongly: the importance of his church membership. He does this, when the interviewer has barely got going with her questions, and he seems very keen to ensure that she gets the 'right' picture of him:

> *R: …with Jerry (son) what do you most enjoy doing with him?*
>
> *Bob: Before we get on to what we enjoy, let me just say something else, which perhaps we haven't come to, which is a big part of our life…well on Sundays we attend a church…*

He also positions the interviewer, comparing her to a friend who is a

> *Bit of a psychologist – I don't know whether that's what you are*

His positioning efforts are reciprocated. Towards the end of the interview the researcher discloses that, like Bob, she also has a fourteen-year-old son. Bob responds in such a way as to suggest that this changes his perception of the interview and the interviewer. He implies that if he had known this all along he would have responded differently:

> *R: My 14 year old has just had a letter from school saying he's not putting enough effort in so (laugh)*
>
> *Bob: Oh well you've got a 14 year old as well, oh you should have told us that at the beginning then, is it a boy or a girl?*
>
> *R: A boy*
>
> *Bob: Oh well you know what I mean.*

Whilst this mutual positioning occurs in a fluid and dynamic way as the interview progresses we have found that it facilitates our analysis to break it down into four elements, all of which can be seen in the example above: Firstly, the interviewee positions the interviewer. Secondly, the interviewee positions themselves (in relation to the interviewer). Thirdly, the interviewer positions the interviewee. Fourthly, the interviewer positions themselves (in relation to the interviewee). This interaction can be seen as a balancing act regarding the control of the narrative, the authoring of the emerging story. To break down the research in this way reminds us that the data collected by means of the interview, (the resulting words on the page of the interview transcript) are the product of a developing social relationship, where both parties are invested in controlling the outcome. We will now examine these elements of mutual positioning in more detail.

Firstly then, we recognise that the interviewee attempts to position the interviewer. We have found examples that reveal how the interviewee attempts to find out, from clues in the interview, who the interviewer is and what they are doing there. The interviewer is

variously positioned in our data as psychologist, (as in the example above), teacher, therapist/counsellor, fellow parent, fellow professional, fellow academic, social worker, and somewhat unusually but not inappropriately: a games show host ("*it's like Mr and Mrs, this*")[iii]. Whilst some of the positions that interviewees choose for their interviewer can be described as one of collusion, for example the frequently adopted 'fellow parent' as in the example above, others were more oppositional, sometimes invoking gender or class or parenthood.

Secondly, in positioning the interviewer the interviewee is also positioning themselves in relation to the interviewer. For example James Towers (father) assumes that the interviewer is a parent like him, wrongly as it happens, and like many in our sample seems to want to collude as fellow parent of teenagers. However he appears to set himself apart from the researcher, suggesting that his family do not act as the ideal 'well behaved' family which he then imputes to her. When she says that she doesn't have a family his response emphasises his parenting experience compared with her inexperience:

> *James: All sit down to tea together, talk about the day, ... in bed at reasonable time, no shouting, no bawling .... You probably do that now but (Laugh)*
>
> *R: No I don't. No*
>
> *James: You're not there* [at home] *now are you?*
>
> *R: No, I don't have a family at all so I'm not in that position (Laugh)*
>
> *James: I tell you it'll put you off all this won't it? (Laugh)*

This aspect of mutual positioning can occur right from the start of the encounter between interviewer and interviewee and in some cases beforehand as the meeting is anticipated and prepared for. Ian Baxter (father) greeted his family's interviewers dressed in a T shirt displaying his affiliation to a particular university. The two interviewers had scarcely entered his house before he was requesting information about the computer software package that would be used to analyse the data from the research. He was clearly positioning his researchers as university people and simultaneously positioning himself as a kindred spirit qualified to undertake research.

Finally, (drawing on elements three and four, identified above) the interviewer is also positioning the interviewee - and themselves. Whilst the interviewee is engaged in positioning the interviewer and positioning themselves in relation to their understandings about the interviewer, the interviewer is also undergoing a corresponding and interdependent process, making judgements about the interviewee and about themselves. This element is often absent from analyses of the dynamics of a research interview. However, in order to explore our question: 'Whose story is it?' we need to look at both parties within the interaction. Sikes (2000), for example provides an interesting analysis of informants' presentations of self and shows how a research interview provides a powerful opportunity for constructing an identity. However she does not acknowledge

that the researcher's own self presentation is a significant influence on the interaction. For example we saw the researcher in Bob Dale's interview above positioning herself as a fellow parent of a 14 year old son, acknowledging Bob's similar position, and in interviewing James Towers the researcher made the decision to reveal herself as a non parent. Such positioning and repositioning can take place throughout the period of contact between interviewer and interviewee.

Positioning and Power

Adopting a position in relation to another person involves a power balance. This is implicit in our question about the ownership of the research story. Much has been written about the types of power held by the interviewer (for example Roberts: 1981, Harding: 1987, Reinharz: 1992). Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry (2004) portray the operation of power between researcher and research participants in a very similar way to our description of mutual positioning. Their emphasis on the fluidity of power within the research interview questions previous assumptions about interviewer power. Exploration of the mutual positioning that was taking place in our interviews showed many instances of interviewee power. For example the interviewee has the power to change the agenda, as we saw when Bob Dale side-stepped a particular question choosing to introduce his own agenda – of church membership. In another case, that of Renee Emerson (mother), the interview was used for a lengthy self-disclosure on a number of personal topics not directly related to the interviewer's schedule and the interviewer had to make a second visit to cover the all the questions in the schedule.

The researcher has an agenda in this type of research and has to conduct the interview so that all the pre-planned questions get some kind of answer. Many techniques and strategies come into play here, in negotiating what can sometimes be a power struggle between researcher and researched. Laurie Scott (father), for example attempted to use the interview as an opportunity to entertain his interviewer with a range of strategies, perhaps defensive, aimed at presenting himself as a comedian in such a way that he was able to avoid answering her questions. The researcher felt the early stages of the interview involved a deliberate attempt on her part to win him over to a more serious approach. The interviewee also has the power to curtail the interview at any time, as indeed was the case on one occasion:

Pete King (father): Anyway I'm sorry young lady the time's up.

Issues of self presentation and 'wanting to be liked' exist for both parties. In the researcher's case it is in their interests to make themselves likeable to the interviewee in order to gain sufficient co-operation to obtain the necessary data. Sometimes this was achieved through collusion as parents, or through the researcher making self disclosures in a deliberate attempt to minimise their own power, for example confessing to parental inadequacies or comparing unfavourably to the interviewee. One researcher praised his interviewee for getting her children to do the washing up and disclosed that his were reluctant to do this.

In this discussion of the interview relationship we have shown how the emerging research narrative is influenced by the mutual positioning of both parties. If we fail to acknowledge the complexity of this interaction and especially if we fail to recognise how we, as researchers, are implicated in its twists and turns, our emerging story will be less 'adequate' (Fay, 1975) and more 'false' (Harding, 1990) . It will fail to live up to the post-positivist aim of presenting a rich, informed and sophisticated narrative woven together from multiple perspectives.

Consistency issues and the problem of presenting an overall story

The issue concerning the representation of complexity occurs at both micro and macro levels within our research process. It concerns the individual interviewee's attempts to present their story in coherent and non-contradictory ways to us, and the researcher's attempts to make sense of contradictions and inconsistencies within and between family units. Consistency is an important issue in terms of presentation of self. For the individual, the research participant, in the presentation of their own accounts we saw evidence of their concerns to present a coherent and consistent story. We know that this mattered to individuals, some more than others, because they would sometimes point out the occasions where they felt they were being contradictory. Usually, however, respondents were not aware of inconsistencies in their stories as they told them to us and they emerged during our analysis of interview transcripts. Inconsistencies, incompatible beliefs, and direct contradictions present the researcher with the challenge of developing an over-arching framework which can contain the complexity or richness of the respondent's story. If this is a problem in the analysis and presentation of one family member's views it is compounded when researchers are trying to bring together multiple perspectives across individuals within the same family unit.

As we conducted our interviews on a one-to-one and entirely confidential basis there was inevitably some interest and concern about what the other family members were saying. One interpretation of this concern is that respondents were anxious to present a coherent, consistent and 'truthful' narrative of the family. For example, sixteen year old Mark Emerson:

> *Mark: She [mum] asked me to Hoover before you came and I said "no, I'm not Hoovering just because they're coming and you can tell them that if you want to!" And I have done now, haven't I?*
>
> *R: Why did you decide not to then?*
>
> *Mark: I just don't want to be false - I mean we're not really tidy people!*

Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) found that when they were arranging sets of family interviews some family members deliberately tried to exclude others because they might be likely to contradict their own accounts. Edwards et al (1999) and Song (1998) also discuss this issue and show that some families are happy with contradictions whilst others are so concerned to present a 'united front' that they go so far as to bar certain members from being interviewed. These negotiations show that engagement with our

participants' presentational issues are implicated from the very start of the research, reminding us again that we have to see how we ourselves, the researchers, are part of the interpersonal dynamic that produces the research narrative.

Families where parents were living separately were particularly likely to have this concern. They were less able to exercise any form of control before our interviews in the way of subtle briefings and they were more likely to be anxious about matching stories. For example we interviewed Roger Sharpe (father) and Sue Sharpe (mother) who separated a year before the interviews took place, their two teenage sons dividing their time equally between the two households. Roger pointed out that his ex partner had been particularly concerned that he and his sons would tell the 'truth' about the family, a problem also discussed by Lewis et al. (2002) in interviewing ex-cohabitees.

Occasionally we found evidence of pre-interview preparations and discussions that brought home the family's concern with its self presentation as a family. For example whilst Jane White (mother) was being interviewed in the sitting room, Andrew White (father) was ironing in the kitchen waiting for his turn. Jane commented on the typicality of his actions:

> *Jane: I think I can hear him ironing and I'm just thinking he's probably just doing that cos you're here, he doesn't do it much [laughter] … so probably when he tells you that he does do some ironing he won't feel as bad then*

Our questions about the imagined perspectives of the other family members provoked a wide range of responses and there were those who found this difficult. In some cases the question was resisted partly because, as some respondents were aware, inconsistencies would arise:

> *R: Do you think your Mum would say you were closest to her?*
>
> *Emma Monaghan: She would probably say 'no' to the tape, but if you asked her that, yeah I think she does. I think she is.*

The corollary of the difficulties that our research participants experienced in presenting these perspectives was their anxiety, and curiosity, about how other members of the family were accurately portraying *their* own perspectives. In several cases parents speculated about the answers they imagined their children would give to the question about who they are closest to. This explicit speculation in the presence of the researcher again underlines their concern with the emerging overall story about the family, particularly when it becomes clear that the interviewer is attempting to explore possible differences of opinion. Janet Graves (mother) is amused as she tries to imagine son Nathan's response.

> *R: Who would you say he's closest to, Nathan, in the family?*

> *Janet: That's a difficult one as well [chuckle] I wonder what he said. Did you ask him that [chuckle] Oh dear.*

The problems of reflecting complexity are writ large in our research because we are comparing several accounts within each family, to the extent of asking perspectivetaking questions like 'What would x say about that?'. These comparisons give rise to issues about the selection between and prioritisation of competing interpretations. We have to ask: Which elements of which accounts (sometimes of the same events) do we attach significance to? How do we make sense of an account? This brings us back to the question: Whose story is it? In order to understand a family and to get the best possible 'least false story' about them (Harding 1990), we need to examine the interview as a whole in terms of what interviewees are trying to say to us, and understand what they are using the interview for. We need to recognise that what our interviewees say is very much influenced by our presence and their assumptions about what we want.

Constructing a story about a family's closeness patterns

An example of this problem of interpretation is family members' accounts of 'closeness' in their family relationships. Our questions on closeness were the most extreme example of our aim of comparing different family members' perceptions of family life, in that we asked respondents to anticipate other members' ideas of who the target child was closest to. From these responses we were able to produce a family profile of beliefs about the target child's family relationships. Sometimes the resulting profile showed a strong consistency and sometimes accounts diverged considerably. Box 1 (overleaf) shows the set of responses for the Worthington family relating to 14 year old John's and 13 year old Jane's family relationships, demonstrating a highly consistent set of beliefs. In the left hand column we show the question that is asked, while the right hand column summarises the response.

In the Worthington family, accounts of 14 year old John's and 13 year old Jane's family relationships demonstrated a highly consistent set of beliefs that both Jane and John are perceived by all family members as closest to their mother. This is a clear example of 'convergent family data' described by Perlesz and Lindsay (2003: p. 33) which intepretivists see as the consensus of social reality between respondents, whilst positivists see it as confirmation of a family 'truth'. The post-positivist, middle ground, position adopted here, in which we evaluate our research outcome according to a criterion of 'least falseness', means that we need to take a second, more critical, look at this apparently straightforward consensus. In doing so, we need to consider the issues of positioning, self presentation and understandings about the function of the interview if we want to be sure we have the best interpretation of all the relevant data. In other words, we need to interpret this consistent story through the lens of our understanding of the Worthingtons' experiences of the interview itself and their use of it as an opportunity to tell us the story they want – maybe to use it as a comment upon Ken's lack of involvement as a father. The story appears, at face value, as their standard family

narrative and they appear to have used the interview as an opportunity for airing it. So there is a real need for us to incorporate our presence into the analysis, practicing 'strong objectivity', because it provides us with an extra source of data beyond the words that interviewees say, and enables us to give a richer more informed story.

Box 1 Family profiles of beliefs about the 'closeness' relationships of target child: The two Worthington children

The Worthington family consists of father Ken, mother Rachel, two children within the target age group: 14 year old John and 13 year old Jane and a younger brother Josh aged 4.	
Closeness beliefs relating to 14 year old John:	
Interview questions to John	**Nominated family member**
Who do you believe you are closest to in the family?	Mother
Who do you believe your mother thinks you are closest to?	Mother
Who do you believe your father thinks you are closest to?	Mother
Interview questions to mother (Rachel)	**Nominated family member**
Who do you think your son John is closest to?	Mother
Who do you think John believes he is closest to?	Mother
Who do you think Ken believes John is closest to?	Mother
Interview questions to father (Ken)	**Nominated family member**
Who do you think your son John is closest to?	Mother
Who do you think John believes he is closest to?	Mother
Who do you think Rachel believes John is closest to?	Mother
Closeness beliefs relating to 13 year old Jane:	
Interview questions to Jane	**Nominated family member**
Who do you believe you are closest to in the family?	Mother
Who do you believe your mother thinks you are closest to?	Mother
Who do you believe your father thinks you are closest to?	Mother
Interview questions to mother (Rachel)	**Nominated family member**
Who do you think your daughter Jane is closest to?	Mother
Who do you think Jane believes she is closest to?	Mother
Who do you think Ken believes Jane is closest to?	Mother
Interview questions to father (Ken)	**Nominated family member**
Who do you think your daughter Jane is closest to?	Mother
Who do you think Jane believes she is closest to?	Mother
Who do you think Rachel believes Jane is closest to?	Mother

Swapping stories: comparing plots.

Initially Ken Worthington (father) positions himself as a strong father-provider and as somebody who has little time for other types of fathering[iv]. During the course of the interview, however, Ken appears to pick up that there is a research 'agenda' about 'involved fathering'. This may be because the interviewer is persistent in her attempts to draw Ken out on the matter of how much time he spends with his children. As the interview progresses Ken increasingly uses it as a 'confessional' expressing his guilt about his lack of involvement with his children.

> *Ken: I'm not the ideal father - I'll openly admit that - probably because I've put work first, which I suppose is good in one respect, but bad in another…*

[Later in the interview]:

> *Ken: I should have been a lot more involved when John and Jane were younger. And that's my own personal fault…You pay by your own mistakes.*

Rachel Worthington (mother) positions herself as a mother-martyr. She colludes with the researcher as a fellow harassed mother. She uses the interview as an opportunity for a 'good moan' about Ken's lack of paternal involvement. The following extracts give an insight into Rachel's positioning of herself and the interviewer and the opportunities this interaction provides for her.

> *Rachel: Ken, my husband, I have to be truthful, never has a meal with us, never. The only time he has a meal with us is on Christmas … But I always sit down, with the children - we always sit down - we don't sit in front of the T.V.*

[Later in the interview]:

> *Rachel: [My children are] terrible - always at each other's throats - they are too alike.*
>
> *R: [speaking about her own children] They're boys and they've got eighteen months between them... they fight a lot! I wish I could say they didn't, but they do.*

[Later in the interview]:

> *Rachel: I don't think a woman has ever really got time to sit down…whereas I think men - they've been to work, they've done what they've got to do, and they've come home, and that's it really.*
>
> *R: Do you feel that you've got to sort of explain that to him, that what you're doing is working hard?*
> *[Rachel agrees]*

This example provides the most extreme case in our data, of a glimpsing of a strong consensual family narrative which appears to have pre-existed our visits. This case then begs the question which is the focus of this paper: are we as researchers accessing a 'reality' about this family? Is this the only story that could be told? In this case we are almost seduced into a realist epistemology through the consistency of accounts. This is unlike cases where the data are more dissonant and where we are consequently forced to be more explicit about our process of comparing interpretations. In terms of our key questions: (Whose story is it? Is it one story or many?) we do seem to have a story which appears to be a Worthington consensus- their story. Yet each member has their own 'take' and our resulting analysis of the four interviews has to be inclusive of all four 'takes', has to recognise that each person has their own position within the overall narrative which they present to their interviewer, and has to incorporate an awareness of our own influences.

Conclusion

At this point it is appropriate to return to the question we borrowed from Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) and that we posed at the outset of this paper 'Are we obliged to construct one overall story, or should we take a more postmodern position, leaving loose threads and contradictions?' The postmodern resolution, with its loose ends, can appear to be a negation of the fact that we set out on the research undertaking with an explicit and negotiated research agenda, with our own questions, theories, biases and blinkers. The postmodern resolution may leave its audience with a reflection of the complexities and contradictions in the data, but in failing to present an overall story, an over-arching analysis, it negates the influence of the researcher as a story maker at every stage of the research process. This resolution illustrates one of 'the dangers of postmodernism' according to Nicholson (1990): 'the abandonment of theory' (p.9). This is why we have adopted the post-positivist position which simultaneously rejects naïve realism and postmodern relativism. The research outcome must succeed in containing the complexity and inconsistencies of our respondents' accounts, the differences between their accounts, and most significantly it must contain, as far as possible, an account of our own influences within the making of the story. This means that we must explore the elements of mutual positioning that occur in the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. We do want to develop a rich analysis. We do want to tell a coherent consistent story. It must be our own story.

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Notes

[i] 28% of households had no adult participation in the labour force, 29% had one parent employed, 43% were dual earner families, 21% had mothers working part time and 22% had mothers working full time. The sample also represented a range of family composition types: 39 families had children living with both biological parents, 8 families had biological parents separated (contact lost with one parent in 4 families), 6 were living in blended families, 4 were living with grandparents or were adopted.
[ii] These two related studies are funded by the Joseph Rowntree foundation.
[iii] A games show on UK TV during the 1970s.
[iv] See Warin et al. 1999 for a presentation of the range of interpretations of fathering in this study.

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