

Embodying Womanhood? – Doing Pregnancy, Doing Research

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Abstract

In 2010, whilst undertaking qualitative research into UK parenting, I became pregnant with my first child. In this paper, I discuss my experiences of this with particular focus on my research relationship with one of the mothers I interviewed whilst pregnant. I describe how, as a white woman researcher in my mid thirties living in the UK, I was positioned by the research participant within and outside femininity discourses based on cultural norms on the feminine body. Drawing on my interview transcript and field notes, I highlight how I negotiated this complex research relationship. I felt problematized by the participant based on constructed notions of femininity. Namely, that within the UK feminine beauty constructs women's ideal body shape as a slender waist.¹ This contradicts feminine notions of woman's capacity to reproduce which entails changing body shape and gaining weight.² I found the research participant (often to my discomfort) openly discussed my embodied pregnancy. Here I argue that, unlike other circumstances, the physicality of pregnancy is considered normative practices of talk.³ I conclude this paper, by arguing that there is a need for closer examination of the taken for granted assumptions associated with the researcher/researched relationship. In particular, I suggest that researchers should consider the significance of their personal biography on the research process and research relationships.⁴

Key Words: Womanhood, femininity, motherhood, qualitative research, research relationships.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I provide an insight into my personal experiences of being pregnant whilst undertaking qualitative research interviews into UK parenting. The complexity of my experiences, in part, lies in the challenges I faced in undertaking face-to-face interviews (with six working mothers in the UK). During these interviews, to my discomfort, the research participants openly discussed my pregnant physicality. Here I focus on data from one participant as space precludes in-depth analysis of my relationships with numerous participants. I consider my discomfort in being positioned within and outside normative discourses of femininity by one participant (Karen⁵). Whilst I give evidence of the ways the participant positioned me within cultural norms of femininity and motherhood, I acknowledge dilemmas I faced in challenging these norms. I conclude this paper by suggesting the need for further research which examines research relationships

during face to face interviews, paying particular attention to subjective experiences of femininity and womanhood.

This paper is located amongst existing feminist informed literature on the social construction of femininity and motherhood as an institution.⁶ Firstly, I outline the background to this UK based study, attending to constructions of motherhood and womanhood to situate my own personal biography and signpost the UK based research context in which the paper is situated. I wish to declare that, I do not assume the paper's generalizability. Instead, I aim to stimulate debate about differences and similarities of cross-cultural norms of femininity and pregnancy within a forum of inter- and multi-disciplinary discussion. Secondly, I describe the study, before moving on to present interview data and field notes of my feelings about the interviews and the research relationships. My discussions focus on the negotiations with the research participant (Karen, white forty-year-old professional woman with two children) and myself (a white woman researcher in her mid thirties who became pregnant with her first child during the research process). I outline my feelings of discomfort in the interview when Karen deemed it acceptable to comment on my pregnant body and my personal biography. I argue that my findings demonstrate how she positioned me in relation to cultural norms of femininity and motherhood mobilised within the UK. These norms construct womanhood and motherhood as mutually constitutive.⁷ I found I was problematized as a woman based on the associations of mothering and femininity.⁸

2. The pregnant body and discourses of femininity

Globally, pregnancy and motherhood have been dominant representations of femininity for decades. Feminist informed scholarship has worked tirelessly to question cultural norms embedded within notions of the femininity and motherhood.⁹ In this paper, I focus on my experiences of being a pregnant researcher to consider the challenges posed by idealised constructions of feminine beauty. Situated amongst this feminist scholarship, here I discuss how pregnancy means weight gain and changing body shape, both of which are positioned outside notions of idealised feminine beauty.

The idealised woman is constructed on notions of biological capability to mother¹⁰. Embedded in constructions of motherhood are notions of femininity. These constructions are presented as a natural outcome of biology and an innate female feminine maternal instinct.¹¹ Motherhood and womanhood are conceptualised as mutually constitutive within a discourse of compulsory heterosexuality.¹² Rooted within the social construction of the mother are contradictory notions of feminine beauty and innate capacity to reproduce. Dominant discourses of femininity in the global West centre on an idealised body shape, specifically representations of a slender waist.¹³ This contradicts with the capacity to be 'feminine' by becoming a mother, represented in pregnancy by shape change and weight gain.¹⁴ As pregnant women's bodies change (they

become larger inevitably as the baby grows inside their body), in the UK these can be positioned outside the discourse of feminine beauty as they are constructed as less attractive.¹⁵

In the past decade, a burgeoning area within feminist informed literature has focused on disrupting the traditional idealised feminine mother construct. One way this has been undertaken is by examining the embodiment of gender and femininity in pregnancy and motherhood.¹⁶ The pregnant body presents embodied examples of the complex everyday realities of doing mothering both in the public and private spaces.¹⁷ The physicality of embodied aspects of motherhood cannot be hidden from view. Weight gain and changing body shape are physiological 'happenings' in the process of becoming a mother. Thus it provides 'physical examples' to trouble the often inaccurate constructions of femininity and motherhood within the UK.¹⁸ For instance, whilst mainstream Anglo-American popular culture provides representations of the pregnant women as symbols of femininity, heterosexuality and motherhood, they do not focus on the physiological leakiness and messiness of pregnancy. (Within feminist scholarship, this located alongside feminist discussions of menstruation and other aspects of embodied womanhood.) Recent feminist scholarship provides much needed addition to the debates about womanhood and femininity¹⁹. These messy physiological realities of the embodied experiences of pregnancy and womanhood function to disrupt the romanticised and sanitised ideal mother construct and its embedded notions of femininity.

Having briefly outlined cultural norms of femininity, motherhood and womanhood dominant within the UK, I present two excerpts from my interview with Karen to describe my interpretations of being positioned by her inside and outside the norms of motherhood and femininity. I discuss how, as a pregnant female researcher in my mid-thirties, I experienced feelings of discomfort when Karen talked openly about my pregnant body and how my body shape was constructed as unattractive within the dominant cultural norms of Anglo-American feminine beauty in early twenty-first century.

3. The Study

Although my research relationship with Karen is the focus of this paper, I interviewed her as part of a larger parenting study involving semi-structured interviews with eleven working mothers and nine working fathers in the UK. The research aimed to examine their parenting experiences during a period of social, economic and political transformation within the UK, namely economic recession, shifting gendered working and parenting participation, and changes to policy and political leadership.²⁰

The study chose working parents with children aged five years and under because these were implicated in most contemporary changes to UK work-family policy (between the data collection period 2008-2010). I used semi-structured interviews with the participants (all living and working in the UK at the time of

data collection (2008-2010)). They varied in cohabiting arrangements, marital status and ethnicity. All identified themselves as heterosexual, aged between 29 and 42 years old and in paid employment at the time of data collection. Their occupations varied in type and contractual arrangements including part-time, full-time, flexi-time, compressed hours, self-employed and temporary contracts.

Recruitment of my participants involved initial advertising using posters, websites and electronic communication tools such as emails and local Library /community group notice boards in two towns within a 15-mile radius of a North West City in England. Volunteers contacted me for preliminary discussions and I used a snowballing sampling technique asking them to recommend other potential participants. This enabled my sample group to expand through parents recommending others who fitted my criteria of being a working parent with a child under five years old. I do not claim that those recruited in my study are representative (see Millennium Cohort Study for evidence of this).²¹ Instead, my research aimed to gain a rich corpus of detailed accounts of their everyday working/parenting experiences.

Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately an hour with each parent. I gained signed ethical consent from each participant and the interviews took place in a negotiated location²². I later transcribed the Dictaphone recorded interview using a simplified version of Jeffersonian notation.²³ Data analysis was framed by an interpretivist approach in which intersubjectivity between researcher and participant is recognised as generating key data.²⁴ I read and reread the transcripts and my field notes, focusing on my interpretation of both the events and the intersubjective relationship between the participant (Karen) and myself. I used existing research²⁵ on mothers-to-be and idealised female body discourse to inform my analysis. In this paper, I examine interview data and field notes focused on one of the mothers in the study. I have chosen to focus on Karen because of the richness of the data and the intense feeling of discomfort I recorded in my field notes after my interview with her.

4. My experiences of interviewing mothers whilst pregnant

Excerpt 1

Karen 'Wow your belly looks big, I bet you feel embarrassed.'

GY 'Oh do I look big?'

*Karen 'Has your midwife said anything to you about your size? I was big like you when I had my second, I was big but I survived in the end.'*²⁶

By virtue of its visible embodiment, my pregnancy was integral to how my identity was co-constructed during the interviews.²⁷ For example in this excerpt Karen positions my pregnant size central in her construction of motherhood. In doing so, she pathologises my body size drawing on associations of acceptability.²⁸ As part of this, she asks me *'Has your midwife said anything to you about your size?'* In doing so, she draws on notions of midwifery expertise in diagnosing 'my

big size' within notions of normal size of a pregnant belly. Howson²⁹ suggests that in the beginning of the twenty-first century, Anglo-American societies have witnessed a transformation to a formalised knowledge of pregnancy and its redefinition as pathology. Within the context of Karen's interview, she identifies her own experiences of pregnancy by drawing on the expertise and knowledge she gained from her midwife. She goes on to position me outside norms by noting that, *'your belly looks big.'* She adds a disclaimer *'I was big like you when I had my second, I was big but I survived in the end,'* using *'survive'* to suggest that with expert midwifery knowledge, I may survive my pathologised pregnancy.

In the excerpt, Karen says *'I bet your feel embarrassed.'* I reply *'Oh do I look big?'* Until my experience of pregnancy, I was unaccustomed to people making explicit comments about my physical appearance. In the interview, I responded to Karen's comment with a question because I felt a heightened sense of awareness about my pregnant physicality. I was also aware of the feminine ideal of the slender-waisted women which dominates representations in the UK's mainstream popular culture. My response to Karen was partly for my own reassurance but also I felt shocked being described as *'big'*. I was fully aware that my body shape had changed inevitably as my pregnancy progressed. I had not, until this point, considered this problematic. I felt this must be noticeable for Karen to comment on it. At this point in the interview, I became acutely aware of how my private gendered and sexualised body as a pregnant woman could not be clearly boundaried from the public body of the researcher.³⁰ For feminist sociologist Caroline Gattrell,³¹ the physical embodiment of pregnancy can signify societal assumptions that there are differential notions of acceptability when discussing physicality that in other circumstances would not be considered normative practices of talk. Like many other researchers, I felt uneasy about these empirical realities of my fleshy material body.³²

In my field notes, I documented how I felt discomfort in Karen's comments about my pregnant size. Despite my academic background (in which I had reviewed existing feminist literature on the regulation of pregnancy and childbirth), I wrote in my field notes about how I needed to ask my midwife if I was big and if there was a problem with my size and my unborn child. Despite feeling Karen problematized my pregnant size, I did not challenge this assumption in the interview with her.

In another excerpt, detailed below, Karen referred to feeling like *'a big fat whale'* whilst pregnant with her first baby. I felt particularly uncomfortable when she finishes her statement by asking me *'You know what I mean, right?'* In doing so, I felt she was appealing to my shared understanding of the dominant cultural norms. She asked me to agree with her that I know what she means and I too *'felt like a big fat whale'*.

Excerpt 2

*'I felt like a big fat whale when I was pregnant with my first baby, I couldn't dress in nice clothes or heels, I'd lost my waist, my womanly curves. You know what I mean right?'*³³

In my field notes I documented I had not, until the point of the interview '*felt like a big fat whale*'. I interpreted her comments as negative representations of the pregnant body and I had, up until the interview, felt positive about my pregnant body. She comments: '*I'd lost my waist, my womanly curves*' and, in doing so, draws on notions of the ideal feminine body as a slender waist and defined hips dominant in the UK. This contradicts the inevitability of weight gain and changing body shape associated with pregnancy. In my field notes I questioned, how could I be both feminine in sense of the slender waist and feminine in becoming a mother? These seemed contradictory notions of femininity to me and I asked myself: did I actually want or expect to be constructed in either of these ways? The existence of a slenderness norm within constructions of femininity in the UK is difficult to ignore, we are aware of it as a dominant cultural norm although we may avoid pursuing slenderness.³⁴

In terms of my intersubjective relationship with Karen, I also recorded feeling my relationship with Karen was in its early stages and I did not want to offend Karen by challenging her comments. I recorded that, on balance, I felt I did not want to challenge Karen's questioning my size and appearance or the fact I felt she judged me as being outside the assumed norms of femininity and motherhood. In my field notes I acknowledged that these and other excerpts were examples of the complex decision-making process as I negotiated my research relationship with Karen. Researchers must make difficult decisions during interviews particularly to ensure relationships remain established. However, I was fully aware that researchers should not put themselves at risk. I did not feel at risk, instead I felt discomfort as I have explored throughout this paper. It is important, however, to signpost here that, if matters arise in which the researcher interprets the research relationship as compromising the safety of those involved, then the researcher has an ethical responsibility to revisit the purpose of the research and deal with ethical concerns by following appropriate procedures in place.

5. Summary and final comments

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's³⁵ argument that, 'We are in the world through our body, and...we perceived that world within our body', I found my pregnant body provided a visible cue during the interviews. As a trained researcher, I was aware of the complex relationship between 'researcher' and 'researched'. In particular, the interpretive research framework I adopted here enabled me to focus on the intersubjectivity between Karen (the participant) and myself (the researcher). According to feminist psychologists Lawthom and Tindall,³⁶ interpretive qualitative research has the capacity to emphasise the rich interconnections of researcher and participant during interviews. By acknowledging this relationship

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between the researcher and research participant, the practice of research can be considered a significant shared meaning-making process, stimulated by intersubjective engagement of both parties. In this paper I have provided two interview excerpts to present the rich and complex relationship between Karen and myself. In this specific interview with Karen I experienced mixed feelings about my relationship and interactions with her. On the one hand, I interpreted her comments and questions as her engagement in the interview. On the other hand, I felt uncomfortable when she commented critically both directly (excerpt 1) and indirectly (excerpt 2) on my physical size. My field notes evidence how, despite feeling reluctant to talk about my pregnancy, I was often drawn into comments about my appearance.

In this paper, I have described how the unfolding of events in an interview situation provides rich data of interesting insights into how I 'did research and pregnancy.' In other words, this paper has drawn attention to intersectionality³⁷ as a theoretical consideration to discuss one example of how femininity was performed and represented. I focused on my own positioning as a UK based white woman, pregnant researcher. I have argued that methodological insights, such as the ones given here, present a sense of the challenges for scholars of femininity wishing to consider how they position themselves within epistemologies and research practise.

Notes

¹ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (London: University of California Press, 1993), page number missing.

² Sally Johnson, Anne Burrows and Iain Williamson, "Does my Bump Look Big in This?" The Meaning of Bodily Changes for First Time Mothers-to-be, *Journal of Health Psychology* 9(3)(2004): 361-74.

³ Caroline Gatrell, *Hard Labour. The Sociology of Parenthood* (Berkshire: OUP, 2005), page number missing.

⁴ Gayle Letherby, *Feminist Research In Theory and Practice* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2003), page number missing.

⁵ Karen's name has been changed to protect her identity following *British Psychological Association Ethics Procedure* (BPS, 2010).

⁶ Tina Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood: A Narrative Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), page number missing.

⁷ Maaret Wager, "Childless by choice? Ambivalence and the female identity," *Feminism & Psychology* 10 (2000): 389 – 395.

⁸ Letherby, *Feminist Research In Theory and Practice*, 13

⁹ Ann Phoenix, Anne Woollett and Eva Lloyd, eds., *Motherhood: Meanings, practices and ideologies* (London: Sage, 1991), page number missing.

¹⁰ Letherby, *Feminist Research In Theory and Practice*, 14.

¹¹ Sandra Roper and Rose Capdevila, 'We are a real family': A Q methodological study on the experiences of stepmothers. [unclear: where does the title end?] *Radical Psychology* 9.2 (2010): page numbers missing.

¹² Wager, 'Childless by choice?,' 390

¹³ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 50.

¹⁴ Johnson, Burrows and Williamson, "Does my Bump Look Big in This?," 361.

¹⁵ Alexandra Howson, *The Body in society*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Policy Press, 2013), page number missing.

¹⁶ Rachel Thomson, et al., *Making Modern Mothers* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2011), page number missing.

¹⁷ Caroline Gatrell, 'Secrets and lies: Breastfeeding and professional paid work,' *Social Science and Medicine* 65 (2007): 393-404.

¹⁸ Johnson, Burrows and Williamson "Does my Bump Look Big in This?," 366.

¹⁹ Caroline Gatrell, *Embodying Women's Work*, (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2008): page number missing.

²⁰ Mary Daly, 'Shifts in family policy in the UK under New Labour,' *Journal of European Social Policy* 20 (2010): 433-443.

²¹ Kirstine Hansen, Heather Joshi and Shirley Dex, eds., *Children of the 21st century: The first five years* (London: Polity Press, 2010), page number missing.

²² Daly, 'Shifts in family policy,' 433-443.

²³ Rachael O'Byrne, Mark Rapley and Susan Hansen, 'You Couldn't Say "No", Could You?: Young Men's Understandings of Sexual Refusal,' *Feminism & Psychology* 16 (2006): 133-154.

²⁴ Rebecca Lawthom and Carol Tindall, 'Phenomenology,' *Qualitative Methods in Psychology: A Research Guide*, ed. Peter Banister et al. (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2011), page number missing.

²⁵ Johnson, Burrows and Williamson "Does my Bump Look Big in This?," 363.

²⁶ Gemma Anne Yarwood, *A discursive examination of UK based working parents talk* (Unpublished interview data, 11 September 2010).

²⁷ Vivien Burr, *Social Constructionism* (East Sussex: Routledge, 2003), page number missing.

²⁸ Howson, *The Body in society*, 140.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁰ Melanie Mauthner, Maxine Birch, Julie Jessop and Tina Miller, *Ethics in Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2002), page number missing.

³¹ Gatrell, *Hard Labour*, 34.

³² Julia Twigg, *The Body in Health and Social Care*, (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), page number missing.

³³ Yarwood, *A discursive examination*.

³⁴ Howson, *The Body in society*, 13.

³⁵ Monika Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception: a guide and commentary* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, year missing), page number missing.

³⁶ Lawthom and Tindall, 'Phenomenology,' page number missing.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

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