



Change, choice and constraint: qualitative longitudinal research

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February 2017

Overview

1. Background to the project
2. Aims, design and methods
3. Some key themes/findings
4. Connecting to policy

Background

The research started in around 2001 and has been exploring how lone mothers and their children negotiate the everyday challenges of sustaining low-income employment over time

Our initial interest and context

1. Lone mothers: low employment & high poverty
2. Children in poverty: their experiences
3. Labour government: 'work is good for you'

The research team: Jane Millar & Tess Ridge

The aims of our research: at start



An in-depth study of lone mother and their children:

1. to examine the impact of paid work, and for some job loss, on family life and living standards over time
2. to explore whether and how families negotiate the everyday challenges of sustaining low-income employment over time.

Key elements in the design

1. Mothers and children as active participants
2. Longitudinal qualitative data
 - Time – a moving picture that changes
 - As does the external context

The sample & interviews

Lone-mother families who:

- Left income support between Oct 2002 and Oct 2003; *and*
- started jobs of 16 hours or more per week with tax credits; *and*
- had at least one child aged between 8 and 14

Three rounds of interviews:

- 50 women and 61 children in early 2004
- 44 women and 53 children in mid to late 2005
- 34 women and 37 children in winter 2007

And in 2016

- 15 women and 17 young people in late 2016

Focus of interviews & analysis

Constant areas: nature & conditions of work, income and benefits, quality of life, well-being, health, role of state support, family and social relationships

Round 1: The transition to work

Rounds 2 & 3: Staying in work

Round 4: The role of relationships, especially family, in sustaining work and quality of life; issues of security and insecurity

Analysis: mothers, children, family, themes, over time, case studies

Some methodological issues

- Different funders each round (ESRC, DWP, JRF)
- Accessing the sample
- Informed consent: mothers and children
- Interviews: what to ask/what to tell
- Analysis: confidentiality
- Feedback to the families

What to ask/what to tell

- Tess Ridge as the interviewer throughout
- Time brings familiarity, generates trust, forges relationships between previous strangers, invites confidences
- As mothers and children come to ‘know’ Tess, they tell her more, not expecting it to be mined by others later
- The intimate conversation with a stranger is subverted and inverted and becomes an intimate conversation with a ‘friend’
- Issues come up as the study progresses/focus changes – e.g. domestic violence and abuse

Confidentiality

1. Use false names, hide some details.
2. Within family - ethics of confidentiality between mothers and children
 - **Children have things to hide** – not liking childcare, moderating needs, going to school when they are unwell, disliking new partners, feeling unhappy about changes in family practices and family time.
 - **They also have things they want to know** – about their mum's health, their work, their relationships, about money, about debt
 - **Mothers have things they want to know** – are their children happy, is their work OK, is their childhood OK, do they like new partners, are they unhappy about money, work, past events
 - **They also have things to hide** – poor health, bullying at work, future plans, debt
3. And confidentiality in general becomes more challenging as time goes on – case studies more identifiable, separate mothers and children

Feedback to participants



Staying in work: work and welfare for lone mothers and their children over time

A research study

Why we are doing the research

There are about 2 million lone-parent families in the UK with about 3 million children. Just over half of the lone mothers are in paid work. We wanted to find out what life is like for lone mothers trying to get into work. We wanted to understand what helps - or makes it more difficult - for people to stay in work. We also wanted to hear directly from the children and young people about how their lives were affected. We wanted to know what people thought about government policies - such as the New Deal for Lone Parents and the Tax Credits - and whether these were helpful.

We got a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council, who fund social science research in Britain, to carry out the study.

What we did

We started in early 2003 by asking the Inland Revenue to find us women who were lone mothers, who had at least one child aged between 8 and 14, and who had recently started working and getting tax credits. They wrote to people who matched that list and asked if they would be willing to take part. About 60 women agreed but

The records from the interviews were kept anonymous. We used numbers and false names so that no-one could be identified.

Who we are

Tess Ridge is a lecturer in social policy and she was the main researcher on the project. As you all know, it was Tess who met the families and carried out the interviews. She has also written many of our research papers so far, especially those focusing on the children.



Jane Millar is a professor of social policy and director of the research centre at the University of Bath, where the project is based. Jane has been involved in writing and presenting research papers, especially in relation to the situation of the mothers.



What we found out

It is not easy to provide a quick summary

We wondered...



What is life really like for children and young people when their mothers go to work?



So Tess went to find out...



She went to lots of different places...



...and spoke to lots of different children...

This is what they told her



Key themes/findings

The family-work project

‘Taking a job means many changes, not just in income, but in everyday life. Thus when a lone mother starts work, her life will change in many ways: daily and weekly time use, personal and work relationships, income and living standards are all subject to change and potentially to greater uncertainty. This is also true for her children, who must adapt to the changed circumstances. Thus while jobs are held by individuals, employment affects the family as a whole’ (Millar and Ridge, 2013, p565).

The *family-work project* – a shared endeavour aimed at embedding paid work into everyday family practice.

- an active process that takes place over time
- shared but the experience and impact not necessarily the same for all
- mothers and children but also other family members

Three strategies for the children

1. Assuming extra responsibilities
 - Housework
 - Self and sibling care
 - Emotional support
2. Moderating and policing needs
 - Hiding illness
3. Accepting and tolerating adverse situations
 - Childcare
 - Changes in family time

For example

Sometimes when mum's struggling and she needs to talk to us all, I help... I like... talk to her with my brother and sister in bed, and we have a really good chat about what's happening and everything.

I don't like asking Mum for money that much so I try not to. Just don't really ask about it...It's not that I'm scared it's just that I feel bad for wanting it. I don't know, sounds stupid, but, like, sometimes I save up my school dinner money and I don't eat at school and then I can save it up and have more money. Don't tell her that!

Once I had really bad tonsillitis and I just went to school because my Mum, like, was getting paid that day and she had to work.

Looking back from 2016

Some ambivalence – trade-offs throughout

In 2004, Shane was 12 years old and looking after himself when his mother was at work. He would draw the curtains to feel safe. His mother working had meant more money in the house but had brought more personal responsibility. At this time he was enjoying the freedom from adult supervision that this arrangement gave him.

In 2005, the financial benefits from work were not so evident to him and he was frustrated by the lack of time that he had with his mum, especially during his school holidays. *“She has to keep working, so I go to my Aunties ... I don’t see her, well most of the holidays I don’t actually see my mum, “cos she’s got work”.*

In 2007 he was 16 years old and at college, hoping to go to university. Reflecting on his mother’s work he felt it was a good thing, although *“It has been stressful, but I guess it was worth it in the end.....you’ve just got to work to get what you want anyway”.*

In 2016 In 2016, he was 25 years old and lived alone in a flat following a period of homelessness and living in hostels. He worked full-time doing long hours - including nights - in the security sector

Connecting to policy

- Range of publications, conferences and seminars
- Close contact with DWP
 - funded round 3 & published the report
- Close contact with NGOs
 - especially CPAG, Gingerbread, Children's Society
- Evidence to Select Committee enquires
- Media and press coverage
- QAP and REF2014 case studies
- 2016 Advisory Group – DWP, Cabinet Office, CPAG, Fawcett Society

Risks and challenges in policy engagement



- Lone mothers & low-income & welfare recipients – subject to moral panics, stigma, negative media representation
- Complexity and dynamics of people's lives in context of search for simple policy solutions
- The dangers of stereotyping – eg families are seen as chaotic, not trying hard enough, not resilient enough
- Findings can be misread, misunderstood, misused and abused

Picking and choosing

– the Welfare Reform Bill debate

Welfare reform debate in the House of Lords – a debate about Clause 57 compelling lone parents to seek employment and ending entitlement to income support for lone parents whose youngest child is aged five

- The Minister had referred to evidence circulated to the house using findings from the family-work project about how *lone parents' employment can provide a good role model for their children*.
- Baroness Lister of Burtersett - 'However, the research also found that that is not always the case. One of the researchers, Tess Ridge of Bath University, writes that, "encouraging lone mothers into unstable and insecure labour markets runs the risk of alienating children from the values of employment. For these children work had held out the promise of something better and that promise had not been kept, so they also experienced disappointment and for some an apparent loss of confidence in the value of work".' *Hansard 25 Jan 2012 : Column 1146*

More information

The family work project: earning and caring in low-income household

<http://www.bath.ac.uk/ipr/policy-briefs/working-lone-mother-families-and-their-children.html>

Change, choice and constraint in family and work

<http://www.bath.ac.uk/casp/projects/change-choice-constraint-family-work/>

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Millar, J., 2007. The dynamics of poverty and employment: the contribution of qualitative longitudinal research to understanding transitions, adaptations and trajectories. *Social Policy and Society*, 6 (4), pp. 533-544.