



'Researching Human Reproduction: Methodological and Ethical Aspects'

A joint event from the Human Reproduction Study Group and the
East Midlands Medical Sociology Group

Friday 5th December 2014, 9.45-13.30
Room 2.08 & 2.10 Edith Murphy House
De Montfort University, Leicester

Event Abstracts

Keynote Speaker: Dr Petra Nordqvist, University of Manchester:
'Researching family sensitivities: Donor conception, secrecy and family life'.

It is notoriously difficult to research that which is kept secret and hidden. This is particularly true in family life, where family secrets are often carefully guarded from the public eye. Donor conception, historically linked with adultery, illegitimate child birth and shame, used to be governed through secrecy which made it socially invisible. Certainly, there was no 'community' of parents of children by donor insemination to recruit for empirical research. In the last couple of decades however, we have seen a significant shift in policy towards openness in this field as assisted conception has become more normalised, which has also made way for families of donor conceived children to be more visible in society and consequently to researchers. In this talk I draw on the recent study 'Relative Strangers' (with Carol Smart) which explored how families negotiate birth by donor conception, and how secrecy and openness are negated in that process. We discovered that while openness is now a 'done deal' in terms of donor conception policy, that is not to say that openness is a done deal in the lives of families of donor conceived children. In this talk I trace how negotiations of secrecy and openness emerge in everyday life and how they impact on the research process; I illustrate this by using examples from fieldwork, recruitment experiences and interviews. I pursue the argument that secrecy still shapes donor conception in significant ways and that in part this is linked in with how families operate. I also suggest that my findings are illustrative of some of the ways in which social research is embedded and shaped by its social, cultural and historical context.

Dr Gareth Thomas, Cardiff University
"Everything's Data, Darling': An Ethnography of Screening for Down's Syndrome in UK Antenatal Care'

In this paper, I reflect on my methodology and fieldwork experiences during a one-year ethnography of screening for Down's syndrome in two antenatal

departments. I begin by identifying how my primary method for collecting data (observations) is grounded in the crucial and sturdy theoretical foundations offered by Goffman, Garfinkel, Foucault, and Latour. In what follows, I discuss my 'preliminary fieldwork' (Caine et al. 2009), how data was collected in a multi-sited study via 'tracking' (Marcus 1995), the fieldwork process, and my relationships with the practitioners who occupied the space subjected to my critical gaze for such a prolonged period. Finally, I identify the limitations, as well as the ethical dimensions, of my study and of ethnography more generally. In short, my paper sketches out my fieldwork and recognises self-conscious reflexivity – urging us to think critically about roles and relationships, about ethics and responsibilities – as a fundamental feature of the ethnographic craft. In so doing, I offer a first-hand account of the benefits, struggles, and realities of conducting ethnographic research in hospitals and specifically into the social aspects of human reproduction.

Dr Juliet Rayment, City University

'Emotional Labour: doing qualitative research in maternity care'

Midwifery is emotionally demanding work. Midwives work with both birth and death, at a time of intense personal and emotional transition for those in their care. Much has been written in recent years of a crisis in the recruitment and retention of midwives in the NHS and the evidence has attributed this crisis to burnout, a lack of professional autonomy, a bullying culture, and an ideological conflict between the way in which midwives wish to practise and the way they are required to practise within large bureaucratic institutions, such as NHS Trusts. Emotional labour is central to midwifery work: both during midwives' encounters with women and their families, and also as a way to negotiate wider organisational tensions.

Whilst carrying out an ethnography of midwives' emotional labour for my doctoral fieldwork, I began to notice the similarities between the midwives' emotional labour and my own. Both appeared to involve the performance of emotions that were at times contrary to the way I felt. Both also involved rapidly building trust and close relationships with others. Qualitative research demands its own emotional labour and reflecting on the work that that involves can help researchers, methodologically, to balance the emotional demands of qualitative research, and substantively, to understand the dynamics of the institutions under study.

Cost of attendance:

Refreshments and lunch will be provided and there will be the opportunity for networking and discussion.

BSA Members £12; Non BSA members £15/ BSA Student Members £10; Non BSA Student £12

Booking is essential. Venue numbers are restricted and it is advisable to book early.

Hosted in conjunction with the Reproduction Research Group at De Montfort University

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