

**Integrating critical realist and feminist methodologies:  
ethical and analytical dilemmas**

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# **Integrating Critical Realist and Feminist Methodologies: Ethical and Analytical Dilemmas**

## **Abstract**

This paper reflects on research carried out with a group of women receiving intensive family support aimed at addressing the cause of their family's 'anti-social behaviour'. The methodological approach to the research was underpinned by the philosophical principles of critical realism. It was also informed by the ethical and political concerns of feminist scholarship. The paper reports on the potential points of tension that arise between feminism and critical realism in empirical research. In particular, attention is centred on the process of trying to marry approaches which stress the central role of participants' knowledge, particularly those who are 'labelled' and whose voices are not readily heard, with the principle that some accounts of 'reality' are better than others.

**Key Words:** Critical realism; feminist research; data analysis; ethics.

## **Introduction**

Over the last decade, I have been engaged in conducting qualitative research examining policy responses to 'anti-social behaviour', in particular, family and parenting-focussed 'solutions' such as Family Intervention Projects (Parr, 2011., 2008). In working to develop knowledge regarding the governance of the 'problem' that has been labelled 'anti-social behaviour', I have argued elsewhere (Parr, 2009) that scholars would benefit from employing

a critical realist approach in their research on the grounds that it may offer a more rigorous research framework that circumvents the short-comings of 'social constructionist' approaches which have been dominant within the policy field. Alongside my belief in the potential benefits of critical realism, I have been committed to adopting what can broadly speaking be labelled as feminist research practices as guiding principles, given that the large majority of research participants have been single-parent women whose social experiences have made them vulnerable. However, I would argue that, in practice, feminist research principles and critical realism do not necessarily sit together comfortably. A particular concern for me has been marrying a desire to allow the 'voices' of women to be 'heard' and their knowledge valued, with a belief in the critical realist principle that some accounts of 'reality' are better than others. This raises questions about how we do data analysis and, in turn, what constitutes knowledge. Tackling these kinds of questions has been challenging given that critical realist literature has primarily been occupied with largely abstract philosophical discussions and epistemological debates (Satsangi, 2013), and there has been less focus on how to actually carry out empirical research. This paper seeks to explore the practicalities of conducting empirical research underpinned by critical realist philosophy. It also examines the dilemmas I faced in trying to reconcile this methodological approach with the ethical and political research practices informed by feminist scholarship. In so doing, the paper draws primarily on research undertaken as part of my doctoral study where I worked through and attempted to resolve these issues.

I begin by outlining briefly my doctoral research. Section two then provides an overview of critical realism and the methodological implications of this philosophical position. In the following section, I provide a discussion of the ethical issues that were prominent in the data gathering process and the broadly feminist research principles I adopted to address these.

The final section then focuses on the dilemma of how to balance feminist approaches which stress the central role of participants' knowledge, particularly those who are 'labelled' and whose voices are not readily heard, with the critical realist position that it is possible and indeed desirable to adjudicate between different representations of 'reality'. A central question is one that Edwards and Sheptycki (2009) have posed, that is, to what extent should researchers' 'expert' knowledge be valued over and above that of other actors?<sup>1</sup> I do not claim to found an easy to answer to this question about who claims to know and how (Gillies and Alldred, 2002). Rather, this paper is intended as a reflective piece that documents how, in my own work, I have conceptualised and tried to resolve what I consider to be potential points of divergence between critical realist and feminist research. In so doing, I have tried to elaborate a position that seeks to provide explanatory accounts on which credible, authoritative pronouncements can be made which can seek to influence the direction of social policy.

## **The research**

Intensive family support was the New Labour Government's (1997-2010) key strategy for changing the behaviour of the 'most challenging' families (Respect Task Force, 2006) - those considered to be 'anti-social' and the 'neighbours from hell'. Since coming to power in the 2010 UK general election, the Liberal-Conservative Coalition government has remained committed to the continuation and expansion of such services as part of the 'troubled family' agenda. Families referred to intensive support projects on account of their behaviour are generally characterised as having multiple and inter-related welfare support needs, and project staff work intensively with them to help address what are considered to be the 'root causes' of the behaviour that has led to complaints. When first established, such projects

were controversial as they sought to control the conduct of families, some of whom were expected to relinquish basic freedoms by moving into residential units and accept being subjected to the near constant scrutiny of project staff. Although there is now a general consensus within the policy community that intensive family support is 'fit for purpose' (White et al, 2008: 146), critical commentators, from a diversity of perspectives, have questioned whether such interventions are really such an unqualified good thing (Featherstone, 2006., 2004; Smith, 2006). My doctoral research sought to critically explore the role of 'intensive family support' in the governance of anti-social behaviour (ASB). Analytical attention was focused on the development and implementation of one case study intensive family support project aimed at reducing ASB among families who are homeless or at risk of eviction on account of their conduct, named here as the Family Support Service (FSS). I was interesting in looking at how power and control are exercised in intensive family support projects and with what purpose. I also wanted to establish to what extent intensive family support is a positive and beneficial or negative and repressive form of intervention. The thesis research was based on semi-structured, in depth, face-to-face interviews as the main research method.

### **Critical Realism**

My research was underpinned by the philosophical assumptions of critical realism. While the position was not used dogmatically, I drew on the ideas and principles associated with the critical realist work of Andrew Sayer (1990, 2000), Danermark *et al* (1997) as well as Layder (1989). Critical realists presuppose an ontology in which the world is seen to be differentiated and make a distinction between three domains of: 'the real', 'the actual', and 'the empirical'. The empirical is constituted only by that which is experienced by individuals;

the actual is constituted by events which may or may not be experienced; while the real is constituted by those mechanisms or causal powers that generate the series of events that constitute events and experiences (Sayer, 2000., Danermark *et al*, 1997; Collier, 1994). This entails the view that the world has depth and that 'the real' cannot be reduced simply to experience, including the experience of the subject. Social science informed by this philosophy is concerned with mechanisms, with understanding what gives rise to the messy outcomes at the level of direct experience in the everyday world of the empirical:

Thus, early feminism inspired by the direct sharing of accounts of women's experiences began to theorize about the structures of women's oppression within society, and the nature of the mechanisms which operated so powerfully to produce inequality at all levels (Clegg, 2006: 316).

According to critical realists, all entities possess an intrinsic 'structure' which endows it with dispositions and capacities to act, behave or 'work' in certain ways. It is the socially produced, lattice-work of relations between individuals and groups that constitutes the structure of the social world and which is understood to be the enabling conditions for human action (e.g. social rules and norms) (Matthews, 2009). Structures are not 'things' with a material existence but are 'real' in the sense that they possess causal powers: "Their existence lies behind and affects manifest phenomena" (Matthews, 2009: 352). That said, social structures are not thought to impact on individuals in a straightforward deterministic manner. Rather, concrete outcomes are understood to be conditioned by the uniqueness of geographical and historical context (Sayer, 2000).

Rejecting crude realism, the crux of critical realism is that social phenomena, be it actions, texts and institutions, exist regardless of interpretations of them; the social world is both socially constructed and real. In critical realism, emphasis is therefore placed on the constitutive role of meaning and language (Sayer, 1994). Realists agree with other philosophical positions (e.g social constructionism) therefore that the naming of phenomena is of central importance, but differ in their commitment to a belief in the material reality underlying discursive accounts of social phenomena. For critical realists, although a social practice is concept dependent and socially constituted, the social world is not identical to the concepts on which it is dependent; we must assess the 'objectivity' of different social constructions. Objectivity refers to how practically adequate different accounts are. Thus, despite the discourse-dependence of our knowledge, we can distinguish between successful and unsuccessful references and produce reliable knowledge that can be effective in informing and explaining (Sayer, 2000). This approach brings to the fore normative issues and the need for social scientists to not only understand and explain the social world scientifically but to think about it normatively. Critical realists therefore accept 'epistemic relativism' in the sense that our beliefs are produced, transient and fallible but do not subscribe to 'judgmental relativism' which claims that all beliefs are equally valid and there are no rational grounds for preferring one to the other:

'We can (and do!) rationally judge between competing theories on the basis of their intrinsic merits as explanations of reality...what critical realism does is to establish the basis of the possibility of this' (Potter and Lopez, 2001:9)

It has been argued that critical realism bears many similarities to research grounded in it's foremost philosophical 'rival', namely, (weak) 'social constructionism' which also



acknowledges the existence of a real world independent of 'constructions' (Fopp, 2008a). Critical realism goes beyond social constructionism, however, by bringing to the fore that which is often tacit and underdeveloped within the latter (Fopp, 2008b). Like social constructionism, critical realism acknowledges that social scientific knowledge is historically and culturally situated but it offers the possibility of being able to judge between competing theories on the basis of their merits as explanations about the social world (Lopez and Potter, 2001). Indeed, many academics, myself included, have not been able to avoid measuring dominant analyses of ASB against alternatives (Nixon and Parr, 2006). It is driven by the central claim that it is unwise and erroneous to abandon the search for 'truth' in social science which in turn enables authoritative claims to be made about how we might initiate change (Layder, 1998).

Given critical realism's alternative and distinctive view of causation, in which 'context' and individual agency is intrinsically involved in causal processes the analytical importance of the former should be accorded analytical importance in understanding social phenomena (Sayer, 1990). Certain research designs, such as case study research, better lend themselves to analyses that are sensitive to contextual and causal circumstances. As such, in critical realist research less weight is placed on 'extensive' research (Sayer, 1990; Danermark, 1997), typically associated with quantitative methods and concerned with the discovery of common properties and general patterns within a population as a whole, a concern with 'breadth' rather than 'depth'. Critical realists claim that other 'languages' are needed to understand the nature of social objects and the way they behave (Sayer, 1992; Crinson, 2001). Emphasis is therefore placed on 'intensive' research which emphasises causal explanation in a specific or a limited number of case studies, be it a person, organisation, cultural group, an event, process, or a whole community (Sayer, 2000). This more detailed and focussed approach is necessary

to understand the specific causal connections and dynamics associated with the phenomena under study (Matthews, 2009). Qualitative methods are associated with this type of research strategy on the basis that they help to clarify complex relationships and processes that are unlikely to be captured by predetermined response categories or standardised quantitative measures.

### **Ethics in Practice**

The broad aim of my doctoral research was to investigate the role of ‘intensive family support’ in the governance of ASB. To do this, I undertook qualitative case study research in one location in order to enhance existing knowledge about the realisation of this particular policy agenda. Critical realist case study research is concerned with seeking (theoretically informed) *explanations* of social phenomena. The approach brings with it an assumption that there is an underlying truth that is amenable to explanation and that research should be concerned with identifying the social causes and effects of the object under study (in my research the FSS) (Danermark *et al*, 1997; Dobson, 2001). In contrast to interpretivists, for critical realists, empirical case studies are not just a study of contingencies (that which is neither necessary nor impossible), but are also concerned with documenting structures and necessity in the world which are relatively enduring, may exist independently of the case study context and determine what it is that exists.

As part of my research, interviews with 26 research participants were conducted over four years. This included project staff, actors from a range of ‘partner’ agencies and interviews with five women who, with their children, had been referred to the FSS on account of allegations of anti-social behaviour which had rendered them homeless or at risk of

homelessness. In this paper I am concerned with the process of conducting research with the latter. The research was limited to a sample of five women as the intention was to 'track' families through the process over an 18 month period with each being interviewed on two or three occasions: 13 in-depth interviews in total were carried out with the women.

There were certain ethical considerations to consider given the sensitive nature of the research topic and the social positions that the women occupied. There is no precise definition of the 'vulnerable' but often the term is underpinned by notions of diminished autonomy and increased risk to adverse social outcomes. As such, people who are identified as being 'vulnerable' will include those who are 'impoverished, disenfranchised, and/or subject to discrimination, intolerance, subordination and stigma (Nyamathi, 1998: 65 In Liamputtong, 2006: 2). The women who agreed to take part in the research could be considered as facing social vulnerability. Indeed, the women suffered stigma associated with the label 'anti-social', and as a result were often alienated from the wider communities in which they lived. A number of them suffered long-term health problems, they survived on low incomes and lived in areas of deprivation and high crime. Extreme care was therefore demanded during the research in order to ensure they were not left worse off after taking part. The approach I adopted in undertaking the study drew on feminist-inspired research practices in an attempt to ensure that my research was ethically responsible.

Feminism can be conceived of as part of a broader political project concerned with power and social change for the benefit of women, yet there is no universal definition of feminism as theory or practice. I use the notion broadly here and draw on the 'moments of agreement' (Franks, 2002) between feminisms to refer to research which aims to 'capture women's lived experiences in a respectful manner that legitimates women's voices as sources of knowledge'

(Campbell and Wasco, 2000: 783. In Liamputtong: 10). This is about validating women's experiences and using their experiences as a basis for building knowledge in order to challenge oppression and effect social change in order to improve women's lives. In terms of qualitative empirical work, and while recognising that there are tensions and debates amongst feminists, feminist work generally has in common an approach that emphasises care and responsibility over outcomes (Edwards and Mautner, 2002). Feminists who have conducted qualitative research have documented the numerous ethical dilemmas that arise during the data collection process which revolve around issues of power and the quality of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. This has led to an accumulated knowledge on what constitutes 'good' research relationships based on: empathy and mutual respect; the need for a less rigid conception of 'method' that allows the researcher flexibility; and for the researcher to not be constrained by an imperative for impersonal, neutral detachment (Birch and Miller, 2002). Furthermore, it is acknowledged how our subjectivity, our different personal histories and our lived experiences influences our research. As such, feminists have argued for a self-critical reflexivity in order to make transparent the process of knowledge production (Broom et al, 2009., Rose, 1997).

Reflecting on my own research, during interviews with the women receiving intensive family support, I was conscious of the particularly pronounced unequal power relations that framed the interview context. This was not only the power imbalance that is often inherent in the research interview as a consequence of the researcher's role in deciding what questions to ask and more or less directing the flow of the conversation, but the disconnection that was a consequence of class differences. I recognised a significant contrast between my own social location and that of the interviewees. My education and salary, and the access to social, cultural and material resources that the latter affords stood in contrast to the women I

interviewed who were unemployed, living on low incomes, in deprived neighbourhoods and in poor quality housing. Some were homeless at the time interviews were conducted and living in temporary accommodation. Despite this, I made connections with the women, tried to develop trust and minimise the effects of these signs of difference (while acknowledging the impossibility of creating a non-hierarchical situation).

I chose not to, as it would have been somewhat disingenuous (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002), to feign naivety of the FSS but did acknowledge the women's expertise in an attempt to foster a more egalitarian relationship. I explained that I was there to learn from them as they had knowledge and experience that I lacked. Although power was not shared equally, this began each interview by signalling to the interviewee that she was in a position that carried some power. The interviews followed a semi-structured format to allow discussion on questions, topics and issues that were of pertinence to the research. This reflects the critical realist view that prior theoretical ideas are important in guiding the research, including the questions posed (Layder 1998). The interviews did not, however, follow a rigid format but were dynamic and adaptive and the women were offered the opportunity to expand on questions, raise new topics and, in part, determined where the interview went. Thus, if the women did not want to address a certain topic, it was not discussed and by the same token if they were particularly interested in another topic, it was discussed more than intended or even desired (Hoffman, 2007). The latter was important given that the women were allowing me access to private, sensitive and intimate knowledge about themselves and their family, and it seemed ethically just to give them the space to talk at length on matters of particular significance to them, sometimes if it was not directly pertinent to the research.

I tried to positively influence the research relationships by fostering a two-way relationship through an element of self-disclosure (Oakley, 1981) where I tried to give something back to the women in return for the information they gave me. I was not concerned this would 'taint' the research. Rather, being open and engaging in a dialogue felt the only and most ethically just approach to take. This included sharing information about myself, my personal life and my opinions with participants; giving the participants the opportunity to ask questions; and engaging in small talk and humour. Despite the differences that clearly existed between myself and these women, through these strategies we sometimes managed to forge common ground. In one interview this was through our similar experiences of working as a cleaner and we exchanged stories as well as tips on cleaning. Through this we laughed together and developed a good rapport. This is not to assert that commonalities lead to sameness or shared identities, indeed there were obvious differences between myself and the women. The condition of some of the women's homes in particular brought into sharp relief the privilege of my own class position. I had not before come into direct contact with such extreme poverty and was disturbed by the circumstances within which some families were surviving.

Notwithstanding this, the women and I built 'good' research relationships. No doubt my gender and ethnicity (all the women were white British) was also an important factor which helped facilitate the research process. Although one of the women in particular was somewhat shy, less self-assured and perhaps did not possess the 'linguistic capital' that enabled her to feel at ease in the interview situation, on the whole the women were forthcoming and I did not encounter any difficulties in arranging subsequent meetings. Some claimed to have found the interview a positive experience.

There were times during interviews when the women became agitated, upset and angry, and expressed acute feelings of sorrow, frustration, guilt, fear and hope. This brought to the fore my ethical responsibility to find ways to not only respond in an appropriate manner, but manage the women's emotions and ensure their emotional well-being was not harmed in any way by the experience or that they did not feel that the interview was a painful or distressing experience. Rather than be indifferent, detached and not responsive to emotional moments for fear of getting 'too close' to the participant or endangering the validity of the response, whenever sensitive and difficult topics were raised by the women I offered comfort and responded as humanly and kindly as possible. Notwithstanding this, when very emotional and traumatic events were talked about I was careful not to probe on these sensitive subjects, offer any opinion or advice, nor try to solve the participants' problems conscious of the fact that I am not trained to engage in 'therapeutic' conversations which could potentially inflict damage upon an individual (Parr, 1998). This said, I was also careful not to move on too quickly and avoid difficult stories that had great significance for the women and which they wanted to tell, even if the interview subject was moving forward in a direction that was not particularly productive for my own research purposes.

Although I tried to manage the interviewees' emotional well-being, there were times where I felt uncomfortable when I left the women once the interview had drawn to a close, particularly where the interview had elicited emotional responses. It was on these occasions when I felt that the process was akin to what Yoland Wadsworth (1984) refers to as a 'data raid', where researchers 'smash and grab': get in, get the data and get out. As such, I felt I wanted to assure the women that their participation might prove worthwhile (in the longer term) and that what they were doing could lead to greater understanding and go some way to effecting positive change with regard to legislation, policy or the behaviour of agencies, yet I

was not convinced of this myself. Rather, I was acutely aware that the research may have little benefit (other than to myself through enhancing my own educational capital in terms of gaining academic publications and a PhD) and I was also pretty certain that the interviewees on the whole were not 'empowered' by the experience nor would personally benefit from the research. For all of these reasons, the research work was often emotionally draining. This raises further ethical dilemmas that there is not that space here to discuss about the notion and politics of 'participation' and even the process of doing 'rapport' building and 'fake' friendship (Holland, 2007., Duncomb and Jessop, 2002).

### **Knowledge Production**

When it came to analysing the data and constructing knowledge about the FSS, like other feminist researchers, it was important to me that the 'voices' of the women taking part in my research were 'heard'. This was particularly pertinent given that the policy field of ASB impacts disproportionately on already disadvantaged women. A key feature of the discourse is a demonising rhetoric about those who fail to regulate their behaviour in line with normalised standards whereby the 'problem family' are distinguished as an uncivilised minority distinct from the 'hard-working, law-abiding majority'. Consequently, although the official ASB discourse remains largely un-gendered, it is as a direct result of the way in which the 'problem' is framed that women have become legitimate targets of state intervention:

... In the wider context of ASB policy discourses which vilify particular segments of the population it is striking that a majority of families defined as anti-social are headed by single mothers. The empirical evidence clearly illustrates how women-headed



households have become the target group for disciplining technologies such as FIPs (Nixon and Hunter, 2009: 120).

I and my colleagues have consequently published work that has tried to give a platform for the demonised 'other', the 'neighbours from hell', to have their voices heard (Hunter et al, 2010., Parr, 2011., Nixon and Parr, 2006). Indeed, women who have told us their stories have often resisted and contested the dominant demonising analysis apparent within official discourses. Listening to women's 'voices' and stories, and understanding their lives, 'in and on their own terms' was important therefore and has indeed been a longstanding concern amongst feminist researchers (Doucet and Mauthner, 1998; Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981).

Although prioritising the 'voices' of women was a key moral and political concern, operationalising this methodological principle within the actual research process and, in particular, in terms of data analysis and knowledge construction is complex, and within feminism there are tensions and debates about how best we represent women in order to make their voices heard (Gillies and Aldred, 2002., Doucet and Mauthner, 1998., Letherby, 2003). The influence of critical realism with its emphasis on the possibility of objective knowledge made the question of whose claims to the 'truth' count, even more pertinent.

Many feminist methodologies recognise how any effort to give research participants a 'voice' reflects not only the participant's interpretation of the phenomena under study but the researcher's interpretation as well; the contingent and situated nature of knowledge.

Research is not only infused with our own identities but wider theoretical and academic debates (Doucet and Mauthner, 1998). As such, it is acknowledged that research only ever

tells a partial and fallible story about the lives of the people under study and that it is impossible to capture 'raw', 'pure' or 'authentic' experiences:

We pay attention to what we think this person is trying to tell us within the context of this relationship, this research setting, and a particular location in the social world (Doucet and Mauthner, 1998: 21).

This endeavour encompasses a willingness to recognise and document our involvement in the process of research in order to legitimate particular representations. This is an argument for objectivity in that our work, if not value-free, is 'value-explicit' (Letherby, 2003b). Yet notwithstanding this, for many feminists the goal is to give respondents the authority to define themselves and their position (Letherby, 2002). They attempt to hear more of respondents' voices and understand more of their perspectives to ensure they are appropriately represented (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998).

Bringing together the desire to give women a voice, with the acknowledgement of the impossibility of full representation, together with the assertion that our work can produce a valid account on which to effect change is a challenge (Layder, 2002). Satsangi (2013) suggests that since the mid-1980s and despite their differences, feminist approaches have tended to have either an explicit or implicit endorsement of methodological assumptions characteristic of the broadly interpretivist realm. These approaches share a number of general ontological assumptions including the belief that there is no one objective reality, nor fundamental truth, but multiple realities that are locally and culturally specific (contingent and non-generalisable) and can be altered by the knower (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Some, such as those inspired by recent developments in grounded theory seek to reduce the voice of

the researcher as much as possible and their role in representing women in order to maximise the authority of the participants. This means 'representing as faithfully as possible the words and experiences of the study participants' (Allen, 2011: 36). In so doing however, it could be argued that researchers fall foul of the shortcomings of empiricism; they continue to prioritise experience as the foundation for knowledge and appear to aspire to value neutrality. In post-modern or post-structuralist feminism, epistemic privilege is rejected and with it objective truth as well, emphasizing instead the contingency and instability of the social identity of respondents, and consequently of their representations. This latter position has been criticised however as paralysing practical efforts at effecting social and political change (Gilles and Alder, 2002). Put simply if one version of events is no more adequate than another this, by implication, means that there can be no advances in knowledge, a particular problem for normative and policy orientated research. These philosophical debates were pertinent to me as I sought both to represent my respondents and tell their stories, yet I also placed an emphasis on providing explanations and the possibility of adjudicating between accounts. The remainder of this section reflects on how I tried to reconcile these priorities through the lens of critical realism.

Like feminist researchers, critical realists accept that the study of social phenomena requires a 'double hermeneutics' which involves interpreting others interpretations (Danermark, 1997)<sup>ii</sup>. However, critical realism goes a step further. For critical realists, although concepts and meanings are necessary for an actors' explanation of their situation, they are likely to not only be flawed but may misrepresent certain aspects of what happens (Sayer, 2000). Indeed, social actors may be unable to explain objectively and to account fully for their actions, for instance, when social actors are constrained and bound by social structures, and the conceptual tools and discursive resources available to them in their culture which provide

them with ways of interpreting their circumstances (Sayer, 1990; Skeggs, 1994). Moreover, while people are always knowledgeable about their conduct, and, in turn, respondents' knowledge enables the researchers knowledge, they can never carry total awareness of the entire set of potential consequences of their action (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). As such, research participant's experiences, or the things they say may not provide reliable grounds for knowledge claims about relationships and structures. Furthermore, it is argued that social reality is not just composed of individuals' meanings; individual reasoning or intention is only one mechanism within a wider process of causes, for example, social positions, norms and rules, and consequences (Layder, 1998; Danermark *et al*, 1997). However, information regarding these is not always obtainable directly from individual experience or indeed research interviews. Thus, it is not enough to collect and repeat the interpretations and explanations that people themselves have of various phenomena - there would arguably be no need for social science if explanations were self-explanatory. For critical realists, it is necessary for the researcher to look beyond the data to gain a broader understanding. Moreover, it is researchers' access to information (theoretical and experiential or data) that respondents are unlikely to have, which allows them to adjudicate between accounts and provide fuller and more adequate explanations:

I have access to more narratives of experience and more interpretative tools than my respondents and I have also been “given” more time to think and particularly to theorise about these issues than many of the people I spoke and wrote to. My presentation is filtered through my understandings, but at the same time I have made a self-conscious attempt to understand my respondents' understandings in their own terms (Letherby, 2002:5.3).

In trying to resolve a tension between critical realism and the commitment to valuing women's stories and wanting their voices to be heard, in my analysis, I began with the experiences of women. I tried to represent the voices of my respondents and I valued their analysis: I listened to their self-conceptions and the meanings they attached to the FSS intervention in their lives. However, I selected extracts from the interview transcripts that, for me, were most salient for the purposes of answering my research questions. In so doing, some respondents had more to 'say' than others and so they appeared more often in my subsequent 'findings'. Moreover, I did not always necessarily accept their accounts as straightforward 'evidence' but sought to reconstitute women's experiences through sociological conceptualisation and theorising (Parr, 2011). This means that I have taken the accounts of my interviewees and analysed them according to my political, personal and intellectual perspective (Skeggs, 2007; Letherby, 2002., 2003). In turn, I had the final say in deciding what participants' experiences revealed and my research findings represented my, not my respondents, interpretations<sup>iii</sup>. 'My' interpretation is one that has emerged out of an engagement with the collective knowledge of a community of experts (Edwards and Sheptycki, 2009). This approach combines an emphasis on prior theoretical ideas and models that feed into and guide research while at the same time attending to the generation of theory from the ongoing analysis of data (Layder, 1998).

I chose not to involve respondents in interpreting, verifying or (re)writing the findings of my research. This decision stands in contrast to feminists who have discussed ways of including participants throughout the research process and many feminist researchers argue for the active participation of women in research in order to remove the notion of ownership of knowledge. This is because I considered respondents a subordinated mass who require 'de-programming' and 'bringing to truth' (Clarke, 2004), nor do I believe that I have produced

something that respondents would not recognise at all. My research, I hope, will ensure a version of their experiences, views and concerns are heard. Rather, my position was driven in part by an anti-relativism which suggests that as researchers, with access to more narratives of experience, theoretical explanations and interpretive tools, while not being intellectual superior, we may be intellectually privileged and this enables a critique of accounts (Letherby, 2003a.,2002). Furthermore, I was concerned that their participation would be undertaken on “stigmatising terms”: that is, the acceptance by participants of a disempowered identity or social location. The women may have been reluctant, for instance, to see their social location as vulnerable (in the way I have described them) or subject to punitive sanction (as some have defined intensive family support). Their participation could potentially have further disempowered them and could have had a detrimental impact on the relationship between the families and the FSS (Taylor, 2005). That said, despite the difficulties associated with explaining theoretical interpretations, providing explanations which linked the women to structures not of their making may have helped counter feelings of inadequacy as Skeggs (1997) found in her study of how women experience class. Furthermore, discussion of findings does enable participants to contradiction, confirm or challenge leading to reassessment, abandonment, reassertion. In *Formations of Class and Gender* (Skeggs, 1997), Skeggs listened to what working class women say about their own lives, but ultimately rejected how they interpreted their activities and their rejection of class. Instead, she retained and reasserted her own interpretation insisting on 'the centrality of class', even though this is something 'which they consciously try to disclaim' (Skeggs, 1997: 94). My conclusions do therefore represent a fragmented representation of my respondents' lives, and may indeed stand in opposition to their accounts or may be viewed as inaccurate. I retained control and power the research process; in the end, I am the one that spoke for my participants (Doucet and Mauthner, 1998).

The process I have presented here with regard to the way in which my empirical research was conducted, written about and presented, will be familiar to many qualitative researchers working from a variety of perspectives. This methodology is not therefore distinctly critical realist: the majority of qualitative researchers use similar techniques of data collection and take as their starting point experiences, yet they conceive of the information obtained in different ways. What critical realism does is bring to the fore that which is often tacit and underdeveloped within other approaches (Fopp, 2008b). There is, for instance, a clear overlap between critical realism and other philosophical positions that draw on (weak or 'soft' versions of) post-structuralism as the latter often contains an implicit realist ontology (Sayer, 1997; Wei-Chung Yeung, 1997; Matthews, 2009). Likewise, there are some implicit if not overt realist themes of argument made by some standpoint feminists (Satsangi, 2013). What critical realism does is put issues of validity, reliability and truthfulness in the foreground and provides a firm and coherent philosophical foundation on which to make methodological choices and establish truth claims. I would agree with Edwards and Hughes (2009) and argue that social science is better cultivated through a direct engagement with, rather than circumvention of, the 'burdens of sociological realism' (Rose and Miller, 1992).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the practicalities of conducting empirical research that is both underpinned by a critical realist philosophical position and the ethical research practices and political concerns associated with feminist scholarship. There are many complex philosophical and methodological dilemmas that the marrying of these two approaches raises and I do not suggest to have addressed all of these within this paper. However, this paper is

an attempt to reflect on how, as a feminist researcher, I conceptualised and resolved the practical methodological issues raised by adopting a critical realist position in my own research. Particular emphasis was placed on how to balance approaches which stress the central role of participants' knowledge particularly those 'labelled' and whose voices are not readily heard with the 'expert' knowledge of the researcher.

With regard to the production of knowledge, I acknowledged that judgements about 'reality' are always situated in and relative to the context within which they are produced, and maintained that research should be respectful of respondents' experiences and understandings. However, in line with the underpinning tenets of critical realism, I also maintained a position that does not dispute the existence of a material reality but assumes the existence of the 'real' and, with that, 'truth' (Letherby, 2003). As such I did not automatically accept women's accounts as straightforward 'evidence' but 'reconstituted' their experiences through sociological conceptualisation and theorising. I believe this approach is necessary if research is to make authoritative claims, have normative implication and have implications for policy and not be concerned solely with issues of accurate representation rather than 'reality' itself. My research is therefore a social scientific truth-claim but one that is fallible and, like the viewpoints of my respondents, open to public scrutiny, criticism and corroboration.



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<sup>i</sup> In the field of disability studies, Danieli and Woodhams (2007) raise a similar concern when they ask whether the aim of emancipatory research should be to provide 'accurate accounts' that honour the views of disabled people as valid or to produce research which supports the social model of disability but which may reflect the researchers views rather than those of the researched.

<sup>ii</sup> This is also recognised in work associated with post-modernism, post-structuralism and within hermeneutic and interpretive traditions.

<sup>iii</sup> A discussion of my 'findings' is published elsewhere [author ref].