

Family Friendly? A Matrifocal Critical Realist exploration of mothers' experiences of parent focused policies in Sixth Form & FE Colleges

Patricia Quashie

University of Huddersfield, Queensgate, Huddersfield. HD1 3DH

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the research process undertaken when using a small-scale qualitative study to explore the experiences of mothers in the tertiary education sector as they combine their working lives with their mothering. It explores the context for the research and reviews the literature surrounding mothers working in education, feminist policy analysis and feminist motherhood research. The use of Matricentric Feminism and Critical Realism to provide a theoretical framework to the study is discussed, along with an explanation of how the two differing theories may be combined to create a novel analytical framework. The paper explains the methods used within a feminist methodology and a discussion of the methods of data analysis to be used is undertaken. It then concludes by suggesting how all these can combine to allow for an explanation of how policies are experienced by the mothers in the study and how changes could be made to improve this experience.

Introduction

Teaching is a profession dominated by women. They make up over three quarters of teachers across all levels (DfE, 2023) although this is slightly lower for the FE sector at around 65.5% (DfE, 2023). Despite this, the gender pay gap in education remains high, being reported at around 23% (TUC, 2023). Women also make up the largest group leaving teaching (outside retirees) each year, with women aged 30-39 being the demographic most likely to leave (MTPT Project, 2021). The gender pay gap also widens at this point. With 30 being the average age that a woman in the UK has her first baby, the gender pay gap is more a motherhood pay gap. There is a large body of research on issues such as the 'part-time penalty', where women are penalized both financially and in term of status for working part time (IFS, 2018) and the 'mummy track', where mothers are sidelined into slower

career progression irrespective of their previous roles (Meurs *et al*, 2010). Much of the research focuses on the family wage gap, as this is an easily measured indicator of the inequalities facing women in the workplace however it should not be seen as the only measure. As mothers work for a wide variety of demographic, social, economic and psychological reasons (Marks & Houston, 2002) with wages being just part of that, measuring inequality and effectiveness of policies purely by wages minimises the reasons for that inequality. Wage gap measurements may also not be accurate in assessing mothers' inequalities as they combine the experience of all women at work. As almost the whole of women's financial penalty can be accounted for by motherhood (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak (2020) the difference between women and mothers needs to be accounted for. 77% of mothers in the UK report a negative or possibly discriminatory experience during

pregnancy, maternity leave, and/or on return from maternity leave (DfBIS, 2019). As this type of discrimination is often underreported this figure may be higher. In an attempt to mitigate some of the issues facing mothers in the workplace and their ability to balance their work and careers, the UK government recommend that schools and colleges have ‘family friendly’ working practices in place. These policies, such as flexible working, enhanced parental leave, and additional childcare provision, “enable more equal sharing of work and childcare between men and women so that both can fulfil their potential at work” (GEO, 2019). Schools that effectively implement these policies report that they retain a higher number of experienced staff, they can recruit from a broader range of teachers and that their staff have improved wellbeing and work-life balance (DfE, 2022). As over 80% of British women are mothers (ONS, 2020), this suggests many mothers are negotiating work and motherhood in Further Education colleges and in doing so, making use of the family friendly policies on offer. Although these policies are ostensibly gender neutral, women take advantage of the policies at higher rates than men meaning that there is a gendered impact. To gain an understanding of how mothers experience these policies, this research project investigates this type of policy as it is found in some sixth form and FE colleges in the North of England. It explores the policies in place, their content and intention alongside the experiences of 8 mothers working in both teaching and support roles in colleges. The research asks how women actually experience these policies, how they navigate work & motherhood and whether the policies help with this negotiation of their dual roles. The research also considers whether these policies could be constructed in a different fashion to be more beneficial to the mothers they are intended to help. It is a small-scale qualitative study that uses a holistic document analysis alongside a thematic analysis of data collected from semi-structured interviews. It makes use of a framework combining Matricentric Feminism and Critical Realism to identify a number of areas where the policies, the way they are enacted and the institutions themselves impact on the way the mothers in the study experience the policies and

their effectiveness in addressing the governments aims.

Context

The study is a feminist policy analysis investigating the experiences of mothers working in Further Education colleges. The next sections focus briefly on the literature in those areas, providing some context for the study.

Mothers working in education

Historically, teaching has been at the forefront of equality for women in the workplace. Education was the first profession to remove the marriage bar for women and accepted the idea of equal pay for women and men in the UK prior to the Equal Pay Act 1970. It has been suggested that teaching is an attractive profession for women because it “facilitates an even work/family balance” (Hakim, 2002) and has been traditionally considered to be “one the most flexible, best paid and secure occupations available to women” (Acker, 1988, p. 1 in Conley & Jenkins 2011). Increasing teacher workloads mean this may now be refuted by many teachers who would argue that the work / family balance is tipped firmly in the favour of work. Where the working lives of women were once considered in the structure of education, the trend towards a more masculinised working day means that combining teaching and motherhood is becoming increasingly difficult for many women (Conley & Jenkins, 2011). Individualised agreements for flexible working, alongside the increased cost to schools for arrangements such as job shares also serve to prevent mothers from progressing in their careers (Moreau et al, 2005). Despite this, many women may choose to stay in teaching long term as it ‘fits with their life’, particularly after having a family (Chiong, Menzies & Parameshwaran, 2017) although they may be in a lower-level position than they would prefer. It has been suggested that women working in more female dominated professions may suffer less from this impact of motherhood on progression (Kang et al, 2020). This study, however, took place in South Korea, a country where employment roles are still

strictly divided on a gendered basis and research in the UK suggests otherwise. Even in female dominated professions the career breaks taken following childbirth had a negative impact on grade progression in both nursing (Davey et al, 2005) and teaching (Grant, 1989 in Acker, 1989). Part-time teachers, who are often mothers, are less likely to apply for higher level roles in schools and are less likely to be considered when they do apply (Brown, 2019). Provision of paid leave has been found to widen the pay gap among full time employees (Thevenon and Solaz, 2013) and generally public sector organisations offer longer periods of higher paid maternity leave than those in the private sector. Mothers in education could therefore be suffering more detriment due to their increased benefits. Gender values at play in a feminised workplace are also of detriment to women, with men who take career breaks not suffering from the same penalty (McIntosh et al, 2012). Women in teaching can, therefore, suffer from the perception that they are looking for a part-time job to fit in with school hours and are more committed to their children than the job. Further research is needed into the impact of career breaks on different professions to establish any links. This research focuses on sixth form and FE colleges which sit between the public and private sector in provision, so comparison of the length and constitution of their policies is important for identification of any connection. The research also looks at the length of time taken by mothers on their maternity leave to investigate any links between this and how they experience their institutions policies.

Feminist policy analysis

Almost all the research on 'family friendly' policies in organisations is quantitative (Ronda et al, 2016; Mansour & Tremblay, 2018) although there are some notable exceptions (Donald et al, 2004). There is a paucity of research into how mothers experience these policies in the workplace in general and in teaching particularly. There is a further lack of studies making use of critical analysis to address these policies. Due to the interplay of college ethos and policy, along with the feminist focus of the

research, a critical policy scholarship approach is taken to the investigation of the policies in this research project. Critical policy scholarship (CPS) developed in education in the 1980s, in the context of the political and social issues of the time (Molla, 2021) allowing for analysis of policies through differing theoretical frameworks. Although policy creators may wish to argue that policy is value neutral, all policy is a product of the values of its creators. This form of policy analysis allows for illumination of problems and suggested solutions, rather than mere identification of what a policy is and does. It therefore allows for a feminist theoretical framework to be used to challenge the gender neutrality of most policy drafting. This can then lead in turn to an emancipatory role for CPS, raising the voices of groups that might otherwise remain unheard. Indeed, those using CPS without emancipatory intent have been described as 'educated critics', having expertise but only criticising, not contributing (Allen, 2017). This suggests that the emancipatory role forms a key part of the concept, meaning that CPS is an appropriate framework to use in a feminist research project. As feminist critical policy analysis, CPS can investigate how patriarchal norms have been used to undermine the experience and representation of women in educational policy and institutions (Molla, 2021). The goal being to transform institutions, not merely to add women (Bensimon & Marshall, 2003). This is particularly pertinent to an educational organisation where the addition of women is not an issue, it is the recognition of the differences between the working lives of men and women (particularly mothers) that is important. Its aim is to uncover hidden gender-bias within policies and the impact they have on women, to reshape the dominant paradigm and to analyse women's needs (Hawkesworth, 1994). As an approach, it does not have the intention to be 'gender-blind' making it appropriate for this research project with motherhood being one of the most gendered roles in society. Policy is generally made without a 'feminist critical glance' (Marshall, 1997) and therefore policy analysis needs to incorporate a critical feminist lens to meet the needs of women and girls impacted by these policies. Considering

Andre Lorde's statement, 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (1984), a new form of analysis is needed in order to challenge the policies (Marshall, 1997). This research project aims to do just that.

Feminist motherhood research

There is a limited amount of feminist motherhood research taking place, with research content relating to motherhood ranging from less than 1% to just under 3% (O'Reilly, 2021). Despite the large role that motherhood and mothering play in the lives of mothers, its scholarly analysis is "marginal, if not non-existent" (Bueskens, 2021). If research aims to understand the lives of mothers, then it needs to consider the impact that being a mother has. This research project aims to take a small step in addressing this dearth of knowledge and understanding. Motherhood is however, contested terrain in feminist research. The essentialisation of motherhood - that it is women's 'natural' responsibility to become mothers and raise children - was seen as a way of creating and legitimising women's oppression (Neyer & Bernadi, 2011). Although motherhood scholars aim to distance mothering and motherhood from this innateness, the negative stance towards motherhood endures in current feminist discourse, with feminist theory remaining wedded to the essentialist idea of motherhood (Takseva, 2018). This construction of motherhood as inherently oppressive suggests that women only become mothers due to the dominance of men. This patriarchal view of motherhood is male defined, controlled and oppressive and offers no sense of agency for mothers. It is distinguished by motherhood scholars from women's experiences of mothering which are female defined and potentially empowering (Rich, 1986). This anti-motherhood stance has also been criticised as universalist by Black, Asian and Indigenous motherhood scholars who argue that their experience of motherhood is very different. Motherhood within these communities is often more highly valued and not seen as an axis for oppression. The current motherhood scholars aim to separate the "patriarchal institution of motherhood" (Rich, 1986)

from the act of mothering. Mothering is then defined as a "socially defined, publicly visible" performed role rather than a biological one (Collett, 2005). They often equate recognition of biological difference with biological essentialism and as a social role mothering can lose this essentialism - anyone can undertake the acts of mothering, whether they are a biological mother or not. Motherhood (and mothering) cannot however be totally separated from the biological aspects. Experiences of motherhood encompass both. It is necessary for feminists to be able to make true statements about the reality of women's lives and to be concerned about the reality of women's bodies (Heckman, 2010). Without this ability, Heckman contends, "feminism makes little sense". In order to make sense of motherhood within feminism, the inconvenient biological facts need to be able to be discussed without accusations of essentialism. This research project aims to discuss both the biological and social impacts of motherhood and mothering on the women in the study. This includes the physical and emotional impacts of pregnancy and birth alongside navigation of the socially structured framework of motherhood that they find themselves in.

Theoretical framework

A combination of two theoretical frameworks, Matricentric Feminism and Critical Realism, was used to guide the methodology and data analysis of this project.

Matricentric Feminism

Matricentric Feminism, developed by Andrea O'Reilly, argues that "the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman" (O'Reilly, 2016). She proposes that many of the social and economic problems faced by women are specifically due to motherhood and therefore, mothers need their own feminism - one that centres their concerns. Matricentric Feminism regards mothering as work that is important and valuable to society and is deserving of "serious and sustained scholarly inquiry". It aims to contest, challenge, and counter the patriarchal oppressive institution of motherhood and seeks to develop research and

activism from the experience and the perspective of mothers thus empowering them. This research aims to incorporate at least some of those principles by centring mothers, their experiences and perspectives and by adding to the motherhood studies discipline. Empowered mothering is a more important indicator of success in employment than any family friendly policies and also allows women to effectively balance motherhood and work (O'Reilly, 2016). It is therefore felt to be an appropriate framework for an investigation of how policies are experienced by mothers at work. Matricentric feminism has been criticised for only applying to “educated, financially secure women with access to support and resources” Middleton (2006). For women without such resources, mothering with the “agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity” described by feminist motherhood scholars is difficult if not impossible. The North American context also discounts the variety of maternity and other parental leaves that are available to women outside the USA. However, no matter when and where a mother returns to work, there are policies in place that will impact her choices and Matricentric Feminism, despite some of the criticisms, can provide a lens for analysis regardless of context.

Although Matricentric Feminism is a critical theory, there is no clarity of explanation that helps to identify and challenge the structures in place that create the “patriarchal oppressive institution”. O'Reilly argues for activism; for consciousness-raised mothers to resist patriarchal feminism, for individual women to counter the orthodoxy of ideal motherhood. All seemingly without consideration that these can be very difficult for many women to apply to their lives. To challenge these structures, they need to be identified and interrogated with analysis that goes beyond the individual mothers to the institutions regulating them (Middleton, 2006). As such, it was felt that Matricentric Feminism needed to be combined with a further framework in order to effectively interrogate the data. This study therefore combines Matricentric Feminism with Critical Realism to provide explanations of the structures in place impacting on mothers' experiences in the sixth-form and FE workplace.

This allows for a move away from the analysis of the individual mother and an investigation of the policies and institutions that may affect the way their motherhood and mothering is structured.

Critical Realism

Critical realism has been developed from work by Roy Bhaskar distinguishing the “intransitive ontological realm” and the “transitive epistemological realm” (Bhaskar, 1978). That is, separating the world into those things that exist whether there is anyone there to observe them or not, and the human production of knowledge of those things. It sits between positivist realism and post-structuralist constructionism, rejecting both those positions. Both the independent existence of causal structures and the human knowledge production that relates understanding of these structures must exist for a philosophical viewpoint to be adequate (Bhaskar *ibid*). Critical realism provides a framework to address the issues in the relationships between social context (ontological structure) and individual self-determination (epistemological agency). It allows investigation of how structures impact on agency both objectively and subjectively and how the differing powers of those structures are experienced conditionally rather than being pre-determined (Archer, 2003). It is therefore an appropriate framework to investigate the relationships between the experiences of the research participants (their agency) and the social structures of the colleges and the policies that they are working within. It allows for analysis of different experiences under the same social structures dependent on the participants' relationships with those structures. To establish why people respond in different ways under the same circumstances, the constraints (real or perceived) of the social structures and the impact on people's decision making must be considered (Archer, 2003). This provides an apposite link with Matricentric Feminism which describes motherhood as a social and historic construction.

Critical Realist Feminism

The definition of 'patriarchal, normative motherhood' as the dominant narrative in western culture is the social structure in which mothers are making their decisions regarding work and within which the institutions in which they work and the policies on which they rely have been constructed. Conversely however, O'Reilly also argues that mothering can be "divested of its biology" (O'Reilly, 2021) and that patriarchal motherhood can be destabilised by arguing that men "can and do engage in mothering work" (Ruddick, 1989). This suggestion ignores the historic constructions of motherhood that are embedded within today's society. For Matricentric Feminism to be of use in the investigation of mothers' experiences, it needs to allow for these constructions to be examined. To allow women's experiences to be investigated in the gendered nature of the context that they find themselves. This suggestion that motherhood is a verb, a collection of behaviours, rather than a concrete experience situates Matricentric Feminism in contemporary post-structural feminism. An arena where there are no binaries, where people are constructed merely of their individual social identities and reality itself is socially constructed. This lies in contradiction to the critical realist position where this approach is seen to encompass the 'epistemic fallacy' – the confusion of knowledge of reality with how reality is. Combining Matricentric Feminism with Critical Realism may therefore appear to be an impossible task due to their divergent ontological frameworks. The link between modern feminism and critical realism has historically been an uneasy one. This is predominantly due to the collapsing of boundaries between ontology and epistemology by feminist theorists, and the insistence of strong boundaries between the two by critical realists. Sandra Harding (1999), criticised Critical Realism (as described by Tony Lawson, 1999) for only having "one basic structure of reality" and of giving no account of the relations between social structure and epistemology. Harding also argues that Critical Realism suffers from a lack of positionality and that it therefore cannot and does not "challenge the hegemonous ideology". As the basis of feminist research is to challenge this hegemony by the

introduction of heterogenous voices, this is a key criticism that needs to be addressed in order for Critical Realism to be an effective tool in feminist analysis. The movement of feminist discourse further in a post-structuralist direction lacks efficacy as an emancipatory method, it is merely a descriptive method and different theoretical resources are needed for a true feminist theory of agency (Francis, 1999). Without the ability to identify and explain the structures in place that are impacting on the agency of those within the structures, there can be no analysis of existent problems. Feminist analysis should be able to identify structural issues as they relate to women. A combination of Matricentric Feminism and Critical Realism therefore allows not only for the experiences of mothers to be heard but also to be critically evaluated within the gendered context of those experiences.

Critical Realism and defining "mother"

The addition of Critical Realism may also help to address the accusation that Matricentric Feminism is essentialist and 'white, middle-class'. Critical Realism can be used to accept 'women' as a category without accusations of universalism or ethnocentrism. Using the concept of abstraction, we can, she says "talk about 'women' without assuming that 'women' is the *only* thing people are" (my emphasis). If women are seen as a composite of different realities dependent on their social categories, then an analysis that abstracts one of these categories can be useful if it is acknowledged that the whole picture of an experience is not being seen (Gunnarsson, 2011). The category of 'mother' can therefore be abstracted for analysis without assuming that 'mother' is the only thing that the women in the study are. To paraphrase Gunnarsson, the conceptualisation of those who occupy the position of mother is different from essentialising motherhood. Although there are tensions between the feminist and critical realist paradigms, it is felt that they can be used effectively together in this project. The use of Critical Realism allows for the experiences of mothers to be situated in their time and space. A feminist analysis needs to

be based in the historic nature of women's experiences and how structures have been created that perpetuate discrimination. Critical Realism further allows for a conceptual category of 'mother' to be used without making essentialist arguments and for the experience of mothers to be analysed without taking an 'additional' approach alongside other social categories. Mothers may not have a common experience, but they do have a common basis for experience. This project aims to analyse the experiences of these participants, from a mother's viewpoint within their own specific time and structures, allowing distancing from the North-American focus of Matricentric Feminism. It does not claim to explain the experience of all mothers. Their experiences may or may not be reflected in the experiences of other mothers working in education. However, it is hoped that some parts of the participants' experiences may resonate with others, even if they do not correspond completely.

Methodology

The research is a feminist research project and therefore makes use of feminist principles throughout the research design and conducting the research. The location of the research within feminist scholarship allows for a contribution to be made to the existing literature around women, work and teaching. Feminism covers a 'diversity of beliefs, practices and politics' (Ramazanoğlu, 2002) and there is tension and debate between feminist theorists and researchers. The aim of feminist research is to challenge the historical male orthodoxy of definitions of knowledge and the high value placed on neutrality and value-free research. This 'neutral' knowledge, is in fact, gendered and views the world through the eyes of, and in the interests of, men (MacKinnon, 1982; Smith, 2005). This research project focuses on this experiential knowledge of a group of women, allowing for at least part of the world to be viewed through their eyes. The semi-structured interview has become the principal means by which feminists have undertaken their research, using them to achieve active involvement of research participants in the construction of research data (Reinharz, 1992). The

interview is often used for exploratory research as it allows for research questions to be addressed whilst also allowing for expanded responses from participants (Galletta & Cross, 2013). The research may be able to realise data outside of what was expected due to the flexibility allowed to respondents. As one of the aims of feminist research is to uncover and reveal ideas and issues that may not have been considered, the interview was felt to be particularly suitable. Interviewing is useful when studying women as this way of learning directly from women's experiences is "an antidote to centuries of ignoring women or having men speak for them" (Reinharz, 1992, pg19). The usual form of interviewing is a masculine model with structured methodological guides to gain objectivity and distance. To make interviewing a more feminist method the relationship between interviewer and interviewee needs to be non-hierarchical (Oakley, 1993). This notion of the non-hierarchical interview has been criticised as there is almost always some power imbalance between researchers and participants. Downplaying of and flexibility with the status of the researcher can help with reducing this imbalance (Reinharz, 2012).

Interview data collection

The data reflecting the participants' experiences of combining motherhood and work were collected from semi-structured interviews with eight participants across three institutions. Purposive sampling was undertaken with criteria for participants being that they had a child under the age of five and had therefore been on maternity leave in the last five years. This allowed for a group of participants who were at similar stages of motherhood. As policies in this area change regularly, with the last major change being the introduction of shared parental leave in 2015, it also allowed for a group who had experienced similar policy environments. The mothers participating in the study had varying numbers of children ranging from one to four. Two of the interviews took place face-to-face in the participants' colleges and the remaining six were conducted using Microsoft Teams. As videoconferencing allows for real time

face to face interaction, it effectively replicates the in-person interview (Lo Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016). Although video-conference based conversations may be less naturalistic and more formalised than a face to face conversation (O'Conaill, Whittaker, & Wilbur, 1993), with Zoom seeing a 151% increase in users due to the recent Covid-19 lockdowns (Reuters, 2020), as people have become more confident with the use of this technology this may no longer be the case. As all participants in this study were comfortable with the use of Teams due to the pandemic, it was considered an appropriate way to undertake the interviews. It also allowed for interviews to take place at mutually convenient times, particularly with participants who did not live or work locally. This meant participants could choose to conduct the interview where they were most comfortable which may then feel safer and more comfortable for them (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). The recording of the interviews allowed for revisiting the body language and facial expressions of the participants when undertaking data analysis. This adds to the depth and richness of the data beyond the written transcription. The interviews were structured around three key points in the women's journey to motherhood; pregnancy at work, maternity leave and their return to work. Although these were the specific areas to be covered, to allow the women to tell their own stories, the participants chose what areas they wanted to focus on and what they felt was important. The interviews were supported using image elicitation. It is well established that photographs can help trigger memories (Collier, 1957), providing richer research data for experiences that may have happened some time ago. Additionally, memory cannot be independent of the context in which it is enacted (Brown & Reavey, 2013, pg. 47) and use of curated photo albums (Smith, 2012) has been used as a feminist research technique to focus memory on particular time. The use of images was designed to help participants to provide this time bound context for their memories. Participants in the study were asked to provide a minimum of 3 photographs representing their feelings during pregnancy, while on maternity leave and on returning to work. This helped to support

the women with remembering how they were feeling during the three phases under discussion, particularly for those who had been on maternity leave longer ago.

Policy data collection

In addition to the data collected from interviews, data from the policies covering maternity, paternity and shared parental leave alongside flexible working in the colleges was analysed. Alongside these documents, the Association of Colleges (AoC) Joint Agreement on Guidance for Family Schemes in Further Education Colleges was also used. This provides guidance to AoC member colleges on what should be included in their policies. 93% of UK colleges are members of the AoC (AOC, 2023) and as such, this guidance influences most 6th form and FE colleges. Although not all the colleges in this study are members, the guidance is based on English law and is therefore applicable to all institutions. In the case of six of the participants, the college policies were obtained from the HR departments of the colleges. Two of the participants were unable to get permission to share their policies. One of these participants was happy to share an old copy of her colleges maternity leave policy however it was felt to be unethical to use a policy where its use had been explicitly refused.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis

The interview data will be analysed using the 6 steps of Braun & Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) (2021). Although as a method it is independent of any epistemological or ontological viewpoint, researchers are not and therefore the data analysis takes place in light of the researcher's theoretical viewpoint (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Building on the suggestion that qualitative researchers should "own their perspective" by specifying their theoretical viewpoints (Elliott et al 1999), Braun & Clarke further argue that the subjectivity of the researcher is the primary tool for

a thematic analysis (2022). The value placed on subjectivity by this method of analysis means that it fits well with a feminist analysis where subjectivity is also a key component (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Although the theoretical flexibility of TA means that more than one theoretical lens can be used to situate the analysis, the combination of two different theoretical frameworks does lead to some complications. Recent critical realist researchers using TA argue that critical thematic analysis is different from the reflexive form (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021; Fryer, 2022) and suggest that there are “problematic philosophical assumptions” (Fryer, 2021). The approach taken by Wiltshire & Ronkainen requires recognition of three different types of themes – experiential (subjective viewpoints), inferential (conceptual redescriptions) and dispositional (theories about properties and powers). There is also a focus on validity and use of more than one coder, neither of which form part of Braun & Clarke’s framework. Fryer further adds a critical realist approach to TA that only seeks causal explanations rather than merely exploratory research. The steps he suggests are similar to the Braun & Clarke model with the addition of always having a research question that ‘seeks a causal explanation of a particular event or experience’. As this research project tends more towards the exploratory than the explanatory (although some explanatory issues are discussed) it is felt that Fryer’s model is not wholly appropriate. The models espoused by both Wiltshire & Ronkainen and Fryer use different forms of critical realism to inform their theoretical analysis and although both argue that they are different from Braun & Clarke’s reflexive TA, those differences appear to be minimal. Although both argue that there is a necessity for ontological realism, the in-built flexibility of reflexive TA allows for this to be used as the lens through which the analysis is undertaken. It is felt that it is not necessary for all critical realist research to provide definitive causal explanations as Fryer suggests. There is room in the critical realist paradigm for exploratory research and this project aims to add to the growing body of work in critical reflexive thematic analysis.

Policy document analysis

The policy documents will be analysed using Cardno’s framework for qualitative policy document analysis (2018). Cardno suggests that where policy documents are being analysed, it is important to have an understanding of the nature and the purpose of the policy. When the organisational policies are generated by external state policies, those policies may need to be added to the analysis. Although writing from a New Zealand perspective, the structure of policy formation from state to local level is mirrored in the UK. As parts of the policy documents under scrutiny in this study are derived from the law relating to employment rights and maternity and parental leave, the government guidance regarding these areas of policy was also included in the analysis. As this research project is concerned with the purpose of the policies, a more contextual approach than a standard quantitative content analysis was needed. The use of Cardno’s framework allows for this more holistic exploration with three areas to be looked at when analysing policy content; the purpose of the policy, the construction of the policy and the practice implementation and impact. Policies need to be read closely for the purpose, underpinning values and strategy purpose and the way in which the policies were constructed was also considered. This method of document analysis was developed with the intention of the analysis of policy documents in educational settings. Although focus of Cardno’s research was on performance appraisal documents, the idea that personnel focused policies in education are “sandwiched between higher level strategy [...] and the operational tier of policy implementation” is transferrable to other policies within educational organisations. This method also allows for the identification of ‘non-frequency’ of content (George, 2009), meaning that the analysis can look for what isn’t contained in policies. Although based on a more quantitative approach, George does argue that the situational context of the document is important. The importance of context when analysing policy documents has been stated by feminist researchers for various reasons. When analysing policies directed towards women

“attention must be paid to the real world in which women live” (McPhail, 2003). As policies are created to address social ‘problems’ and that these ‘problems’ are highly contextualised and may exist in some areas but not others Bacchi (1999), it is important to consider the world in which the study participants are living. As white, educated, married mothers in the North of England, the impact of the policies is likely to be different from women living in a different ‘real world’. In addition to the analysis of the purpose, construction and implementation of the policies, the policies also needed to be analysed through a feminist lens. Gender inequities are often so subtle that methodologies and models require expansion to incorporate gender (Marshall, 1997) and asking questions about women requires centring women in those questions. The analysis of the policy documents in this study expands Cardno’s analysis tool to centre women and mothers at all three stages. For a policy analysis to be regarded as a feminist analysis, gender should be posed as a fundamental category (Marshall, 1997), with the analysis working to expose the gendering that exists in both gender explicit and gender-neutral practices, advantaging men and disadvantaging women (Acker, 1992). This analysis investigates any gendered role assumptions made in the policies including both overt and hidden issues. The analysis should also be concerned with “differences, local context, specificity and historicity” (Marshall, 1997). Gender blindness of policies does not equate to equal treatment and the differences between men and women need recognition to achieve equality (Irigaray, 1993). Gender neutral policies can actually have disproportionately gendered effects (McPhail, 2003) and the use of gender-neutral language or otherwise in the policies was also analysed. While some of the policies being analysed are explicitly directed at either mothers or fathers and as such would appear to recognise the difference, related policies are not. As Baer (1999) argues, policies can “treat women and men as alike when they are alike and different when they are different”. They can be gender neutral when needed while considering the physical and socially gendered differences between men and women. Additionally, Marshall states that

a feminist analysis should be based in women’s lived experience and be transformative and interventionist. While it would appear that a document analysis cannot be ‘based in women’s lived experience’, all policy issues are in fact of concern to women and their lives. Any feminist policy analysis is therefore addressing the issues that concern women within their lived experience. This analysis takes what Yanow (2000) describes as a ‘qualitative-interpretivist’ approach to content analysis. One that “focuses on the meanings of policy, on the values, feelings, or beliefs they express”. This allows for a more reflexive approach to be taken along with an acknowledgment of the situatedness of the policies which is more suitable for a feminist research project. As Yanow argues “it is not possible for an analyst to stand outside of the policy issue being studied” and this more interpretive content analysis allows the differences between the intention of the policies and the experience of women have of them to be explored.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the research process and thinking behind a small-scale qualitative study into how mothers experience the ‘family friendly’ policies in their workplace. It has explained how the use of feminist research principles enables the stories of the women in the study to be told. Alongside this, the use of Matricentric Feminism gives the opportunity to put the mothers in the study at the centre of the research and add to the growing literature on motherhood research. The combination of Matricentric Feminism with Critical Realism to form a novel theoretical approach further allows for the social structures impacting on the mothers’ agency and choices to be identified. It is hoped that as the data is analysed, the use of the two different analytical tools will, combined with the theory, provide an explanation of the mothers’ experiences and an insight into how policies could be changed to put mothers at the heart of policy that affects them.

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