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Play and activities with children – considerations around the work-family boundaries

Introduction: my research

My research considers changes within the context of the “traditional” division between the work and the family “spheres”. Exploring these boundaries seems important in order to understand to what extent the ‘emotional’ of people’s live is arranged autonomously or if the ‘economic’ impinges in it.

The **interface between family and work** is supposed to be characterised by **how people define, manage and experience or even mix these two domains of everyday life in a context characterised by changing working arrangements and family formations**. In particular this research explores the complex ways in which people prioritise, value and give emphasis to certain aspects of their everyday life.

This paper

This paper explores how children’s presence affects parents’ strategies of combining home and work. These are some of the questions guiding the research done for this paper. What is children’s role in parents’ practices of mediation between work and home? How the care element and the play element influence parents’ boundaries of family and work? Parents’ everyday life with children is analysed as constituting the ‘emotional’ and moral side of family life and as such is connected to the caring and gendered aspects of family and paid work.

The sample:

The research participants are 27 married/cohabiting, heterosexual couples living in South Manchester (mainly from Chorlton, Withington and Didsbury); both partners are employed (either full-time or part-time) and have at least one dependant child (the age range of the children mainly falls between 0 and 11). The sample of people that took part to my research is chiefly made up by middle-class/professionals; there are many teachers, some nurses, social and welfare workers, some other professionals like GPs, consultants, professors, few senior managers, two scientists, a small firm director and a dean of a University faculty.

Children's activities and play: spontaneous activities, formal activities

Life with children is presented to be at the core of participants' daily family life in the sense that the interactions between all of them are portrayed to characterise participants' communal life. In other research (Daly, 2001) this presentation is interpreted as reflecting the expectation about "good parenting", that is social norms shaping interaction within the family.

These social norms also are linked to a kind of paradox, whereby dual earner couples are sensitive to claims about parenting ideals, encompassing sustained, attentive nurturing (Craig, 2006). Yet dual earner couples can experience more acutely than other the invasiveness of paid work (Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport, 2006). Issues around dual earner families, children and paid work get more puzzling when we consider that time and activities with children "contribute to the cultural capital held by and embodied in the family itself" (Vincent and Ball, 2006) yet according to some research we are witnessing a "blurring" of the boundaries between home and paid work (see Lewis, 2003 for discussion of the "blurring").

An exploration on how dual earner couples construct their "normal" day with children may provide a clarification of the factors implied in these paradoxes. An understanding on the way that parents create family worlds: rules, rituals, routines, activities and play that regulate children's everyday behaviours and impart a sense of what is normal, may tell something about work-family boundaries and the creation of spaces for the "family's transmission of cultural capital".

Among the various "things" parents do with their children I selected playful and recreational activities. Such a choice reflects the amount of time parents invest in keeping their children occupied, the effort in organising activities for them and the effort in playing with them, but also the fun they may experience in their "non-work" time together. Such a duality of 'fun' and 'strain' came up especially in the accounts around 'spontaneous' activities with children.

Accounts around time with children indirectly express how parents sustain an emotional focus in their interaction with children. In framing these activities, in marking them as separate from other domains of daily life, participants also express a definition of different spheres of action. On its turn, this difference is framed by a different gender approach to meanings of work and family time.

'Formal' activities (extra-curricular 'enrichment' activities)

I use the term 'formal activities' in a sort of *in vivo code* as in many participants' perception, children's "activities" are only that ones arranged and performed through *ad hoc* organisations and/or in *ad hoc* places (so: swimming, football, basket ball, ballet, horse riding, drama, piano lessons etc.) which also imply regular attendance over time. Indeed when asked "what type of activities do your children do?" at times there were signs of embarrassment, as if in the case they did not arrange the type of 'formal activities' described above, it would follow that they were "bad parents". My interview question caused so much misunderstanding that I changed into a very general "what do you do with your children once at home?"

Kate (part time) and Ross (full time) are quite typical of the sample, although other participants do not organise as many activities for their children as them. They have two daughters age 8 and 6 and they are quite busy in organising for them a whole set of activities. These take part especially in the weekend:

Kate. Saturday, in a morning on Saturday I take children swimming and that takes all morning and I leave Ross very often to do housework (*laughs*) and then (...) on a Sunday what do we do? again sometime we go out for the day... children do some horse riding some weekends, so we share taking them, I take them sometimes Ross take them sometimes and that's usually in the afternoon (...)

However it's not just about swimming and horse riding: their children both do drama after school on a week day evening and at the time of the interview the parents were planning to get the older one to piano lessons. In general it is not unusual at all for parents to organise more than one 'formal' activity with children. For instance George and Michelle split Saturday that way: George takes the two children (both age 7) to football in the morning and Michelle take them to roller skating in the afternoon. But these activities are not only confined to the weekend:

George. They are very, very active kids, particularly Benjamin... physically he really needs to spend a lot of energy, (...) he is in a proper club now... and he's like training on Wednesday night and playing the matches on Saturday... and also recently he's has been training with little Man city junior... so he plays Friday night and Saturday morning (...)

Michelle. We go swimming, roller skating... sometimes their little friends come around so they have tea and play together... out, take'em in the park, you know,

George. ...and sometimes they get invited by friends, you know, we have a network through school / obviously they are classmates / so maybe they spend an afternoon playing in their house, you know between them, (...)

Michelle. We are busy, believe me!

Parents' role consists in setting these activities up, supervising the attendance and providing, in most of the cases, transport ("we are taxi drivers" as some of the participants said to me). However as these activities have to be managed with other

ordinary activities and “things” that they do together, it means parents get very busy in the weekend and during the week. This is how Kate and Ross feel about it.

Interviewer: You organise quite a few activities for your children. Does it take a lot of time to arrange that? A lot of efforts?

Kate: Not to arrange, but to... I think **it takes up quite a lot of time**, it's a **commitment** isn't it?

Ross: I think, like a lot of children... **they'll** try things and (...) if they try various things that they've, you know, given up after a few weeks or so on and ehrrr I think the swimming... they've stuck at it, but they are getting I think to the stage where it's sometimes difficult...

Kate: they don't really want to do it...

Ross: Though they enjoy it when they get there... Horse riding at the moment is a big... they're very, very keen on that and of course we then have to buy all the gear, all the clothes and the hats so you do get into some expense, but **as long as they're enjoying it** and as long as they're willing to go, then we don't mind that do we? [*My emphasis*]

From this account it seems that “commitment” requires the careful observation of children's progress, the monitoring of their involvement, the supervising the overall attendance and preventing a too easy dropping off from an ongoing activity or a too easy taking up of a new activity (as well as the consideration of the financial implication of all those). It is a practical and ‘organisational’ focus that needs to be maintained in time. This “organisational intelligence” (Benn, 1998; Gatrell, 2005), together with the commitment Kate talks about can be interpreted as frame related to caring for what children enjoy and their chances to make new experiences. This frame as well as referring to the definition of home domain, to the “marking” (Brannen) of clear boundaries between family and work, it is also connected to gender norms: it is Kate that talks about commitment and admits that the organisational aspects of these activities “takes up a lot of time”, where Ross evades the question and talks about his children in general (this seems consistent with other research on mothers doing the bulk of work around childcare and activities, e.g. Vincent and Ball, 2006:109).

‘Spontaneous’ activities

What are spontaneous activities, then? Here is how the interviewer and the participant came to an understanding of those:

Interviewer. In a normal day what do you do with your children (*Julian 6 years and Louise 15 months*)?

Sid. Now at the minute I spend more time with Julian, and Joanne look closely after the younger daughter ehmm what do we do? Ehmmm (*long pause*)

Interviewer. General play? I mean do you have...

Sid. General play! Things that we do, we like to play in the computer, the play station with me, he actually tells me what to do in these cases, and then we do that... reading, a lot of reading together...

Interviewer. yeah, I was thinking, does he regularly go to a swimming pool or a football club, [or is it not that regular

Sid. [No, it's on a basis we **fancy** doing this so let's do this.. like last week he wanted to plant weed, so we went and buy some seeds, we've put it in little pots...and now it's growing!

Interviewer. Mhh like in the weekend, when he has his friends around: is it that fairly regular I mean, it is still **spontaneous** but [

Sid. [**Yeah spontaneous**, it may happen (...)] *[my emphasis]*

Sid paused before answering my question. I take this as a sign of having to recognise and label events that are otherwise normally undistinguished in the flux of daily activities. They belong to the “normal” routine of daily life and they don't stand out as other ‘formal’ activities would, such as swimming or football (especially when these are done regularly). So “spontaneous activities” are everyday activities participants “fancy” doing with their children, although the week end usually provides more time for playful interaction between parents and children. In Sid's case, the “things that we do” are computer games, play station, reading books and other games initiated by the boy. In other cases are board games or (for Ariann mother of two girls aged 3½ and 1½ years old) jigsaw, puzzles, drawing and painting:

Interviewer. Amongst the various activities you do with your children, do you have any that is more tiring than other, or takes more time?

Horace. Ehmm to be honest with you, I am tired quite a lot of the time, so, I play with them based on what they want to do, rather than on what I want to do... I don't **initiate playing** with them, Ariann is a lot better she would play with their jigsaw, puzzles and they like to do a lot of drawing, painting, sticking up with glue, and using stickers, that's the most common thing that they do, they sit at the kitchen table and do those things. *[my emphasis]*

“Initiate playing” is then understood as demanding activity, which require time, imagination, empathy, patience, at time proper manual skills, or at least having a go at it; all qualities that not always participants are willing or capable to apply. Another element emerging from that account is that it is actually the mother doing the “initiate playing”, which is, in the last case, full time worker as the husband. This is quite typical of my sample: not only mothers tend to spend more time with their children in playful activities, whereas fathers report to be “tired”, but they are also more imaginative, they “initiate playing”. This point is quite important for this research as this approach to children's play implies practical work which fills up of meaning the otherwise “black box” of family time, or in other words defines a symbolic space of “family” intimacy.

In Monica's account these elements are linked to another factor:

Interviewer: A lot of parents told me they let they leave games to play up to them and they sort of... follow what the children do.

Monica: We do a lot of **following** – she does get bored though, and she won't **initiate game playing** for the whole weekend you know I don't think any four year old would be able to manage that for the whole weekend.....to initiate the games themselves for the whole time (...) what we try to do is have a

friend round for her to play with that's what she wants more than anything, it's other children to play with , so I mean I go through **a lot of effort** to make friends with other parents so that we can have their children round to keep her amused at the weekends and then other ..and that works both ways because she gets invited back and you get an afternoon off, you know, so **I try to nurture those relationships** as much as I can (...) [*my emphasis*]

So here we have another account about activities and the type of “initiate playing” and “following” they do in order to play with their child. As above, it seems possible to infer an intrinsic strain around the interaction she brings forth during the weekend, as the combination of both, “following” and “initiate playing”, prove difficult to be carried on.

Monica also talks about how she arranges friends to come over to play with her child, in so doing shifting from being partner in playing to supervisor of playful activities. Such a shift does not occur smoothly, as she says that she has “through go to a lot of effort” to establish and maintain a parents’ network. From the point of view of this section, such ‘strategic’ move of parents indicates that spontaneous play is not purely the realm of emotional bonding with the child, but it also trigger off organisational activities which require time and dedication. The organisation of parents’ networks is typical of the sample and it is very often done by women rather than men (see also Brannen *et al.* 2004; Coltrane, 2000).

When asked about explicit meanings around ‘spontaneous’ activities, participants were not capable most of the time to articulate specific feelings or mention specific events. As analysed at the beginning of this section, unstructured activities with children were usually felt as not distinct from the constant flow of events in their ordinary day. This is how Alex explains it:

Interviewer. Mmh and among the various things you do with your children is there anything that is more tiring than others? Or on the other hand, anything you enjoy more than others?

Alex: (pause) it's a constant stream of little activities, that takes 10 – 15 minutes out of each of them, you know? It's almost like you're moving from one thing to the next thing to keep them occupied, stop them getting bored or fractious (...)

Such an account gives the impression that within the frame of spontaneous play (and recreational activities in general) an indeterminate number of “little activities” can happen, without changing the meaning of Alex’s interaction with his children. Thus the characteristic of these instances is to be plastic as participants use loosely this frame without coming to a rigid commitment to the situation happening within it: plays can be terminated according to specific and ever changing circumstances.

However, if these spontaneous activities are loosely framed in participants' accounts, there is also a gendered side of this porous frame. Men's accounts about interaction with children seem more oriented to report this type of undifferentiated stream of activities, as if they were re-active to the context, rather than the organiser. Women, yet within a frame of freely organised activities, are those who talk about "doing" something. The same concept of frame can be used to see how play activities with children come to "mark" the family domain against the work domain on a way that little blurring is reported in accounts of everyday experience: the frame of play can allow interruptions (leaving momentarily the playing for checking emails, but rarely so and nothing more engaging than that) without breaking the relationships established within it.

Participants' accounts refer to daily life with children as giving a 'light' touch to their typical day, even if they associate these activities to strains and "hard work" (Roger). Here is how Josh and Diane (two daughters: Nadine 9 and Edwina 4 years old), from two different family settings, give accounts about it:

Interviewer. And which activity do you enjoy more doing with your children?

Josh. I think that if they are happy, you are happy! So **if they are doing something they enjoy**, then as long as they are enjoying it you enjoy it as well.

Interviewer. (...) which activity is more gratifying to do with them?

Diane. Probably just **doing things with them**, because they like to join in and be involved... if I'm cooking one of them will do one thing and the other will do another thing, they often... Edwina recently took an interest in cooking, so if I'm make tea she'll go "can I do this" or "can I do that"... **we** sort of do things together, simple things, it does not have to be anything... I like to be with them! [*my emphasis*]

It must be noticed again that there is a gender division on how these activities are experienced and carried out, which entails the mother "doing" something with the children, where the father relies rather on "if they are doing something they enjoy", so to a less active approach. They also use different pronouns: for the mother is the case of: "we", for the father: "they". For my research this gender division is interesting as pertain to a context where ordinary life is filled by children's presence ("I like to be with them") and is characterised by aimless interaction ("if they are happy, you are happy"). Obviously these two elements are oriented to establish emotional bonds between parents and children and to create emotional security within the domain of home and family life. However this important emotional element of the family

domain relies on a “tacit” specialisation of mothers in the playful interaction with children.

Conclusions

Recreational activities of the type analysed in this paper can be considered essential in characterising participants’ ordinary day in its emotional side, to characterise the “free” time left at the end of the day in its special relationship with children. The aimless interaction and the feeling of children’s “simple” presence come to constitute perhaps one of the central dimensions of the emotional bonding in the daily life of some of the families. Though, such an emotional content of family life is arranged through the practical and symbolic division of domestic labour.

On the other hand, the emotional content of spontaneous activities proved difficult to be expressed and conceptualised in ordinary language: spontaneous activities are usually associated with strains, effort, or dispersed activities, all “things” linked to the flow of daily events. These activities have a more ‘porous’ frame than the ‘formal’ activities, they are less clearly demarcated from other daily events, however both daily practices with children can be seen as symbolic arrangements oriented to “mark off” family practices from the rest of everyday life practices. These symbolic arrangements, as well as signalling an intensification of parenting (Vincent and Ball, 2006: 156-8), are always associated with the gendered division of labour of the families practices themselves, so that it is possible to speak about a gendered nature of the family and work boundaries.