

# 'Am I rambling?' on the advantages of interviewing couples together

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## Abstract

This article addresses a methodological controversy regarding the question of whether couples should ideally be interviewed together or apart. It draws on three different studies in which joint couple interviews were used either as the sole source of data or in combination with individual interviews. The authors focus on the specifics and strengths of joint couple interviews, and they argue that interviewing couples together has several advantages, such as solving the ethical problems of anonymity and consent among interviewees, and results in the production of rich data, including observational data. Furthermore, the authors point to the practical advantages of conducting joint interviews with couples. In taking a relational view of the self and of what is produced in research interviews, the authors propose to apply the concept of family display, originally proposed by Janet Finch. It is argued that the researcher may be seen as one of many possible audiences for this type of family practice.

## Keywords

family display, family practice, family research, joint couple interview, qualitative method, relational self, research interview

## Introduction

As family researchers, we have employed the method of joint couple interviews in our research projects. When discussing our projects with other researchers, we have both encountered negative attitudes and prejudice towards this form of interview. Those who voice their scepticism often seem to take it for granted that joint couple interviews are a 'second best' to individual interviews and that interviewing couples together provides

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inferior data to interviews where partners are interviewed separately. The implicit assumption is that individual interviews have an advantage over joint interviews, and this is based on the presumption that they bring the researcher closer to the unencumbered voice of the interviewee. However, in our experience, the joint couple interview is a source of interesting data for our studies on gender, work and care. For this study, therefore, we wanted to examine more systematically the possible benefits of this way of doing interviews and consider ways of understanding the type of knowledge base this method will provide.

When sociological method textbooks and other literature on interviewing methods are consulted, it appears that the idea of conducting joint interviews with couples has rarely been considered in detail. The seminal and much cited textbook on qualitative methods by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), for instance, does not mention the joint couple interview, although the book includes chapters on several different methods, including focus group interviews. We have not found any significant critiques or arguments against joint couple interviews in the existing literature. The main methods discussed are individual and group interviews, with the group interviews usually limited to situations where the participants are unknown to each other.

In this article, we draw on our experiences of studies in which joint couple interviews were used as the sole source of data or were used in combination with individual interviews. In these studies, we have been responsible, either alone or as part of a research group, for the design and conduct of the interviews.

## Interviewing relational selves

Those who make claims for the superiority of the individual research interview over the joint interview can be said to have taken the individualistic view of an autonomous and authentic self for granted. Such a view of the self is closely associated with naive realism. Since Henriques et al.'s (1998) *Changing the Subject*, the subject has, so to speak, never been the same, and identities now tend to be seen as inherently fragmented, contingent and unstable. Likewise, following the cultural and narrative turn in social sciences, the qualitative research interview is seen to represent a specific situation in which the data are being co-produced in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, who are using more or less agreed-upon cultural scripts. Interview data are thus not seen as exact representations of 'real' experiences but as constructions, narratives or stories produced in the specific context of the research interview.

Mead (1934) put forward the view that the self is inherently relational, and since the 1980s, such a relational view has become prominent in studies of gender (Carrigan et al., 1985; West and Zimmerman, 1987), family life (Morgan, 1996) and personal life (Smart, 2007). Gender, family, personal life and subjectivity have subsequently come to be regarded as social practices, as well as ongoing processes of coming into being that occur in relations with others. Taking a fully relational self as a starting point, one could argue that when co-production takes place between an interviewer and an interviewee in a real-life context, which involves significant others from the informant's lifeworld, the stories presented are just as 'true' as the ones produced between interviewer and interviewee in an individual research interview context. While accepting that all research interviews

involve producing knowledge together, going beyond the one-on-one researcher–informant relationship can be seen as a way of opening up new and interesting knowledge, rather than as a limitation.

Since the link between a story told and a life lived (Wengraf, 2001) can no longer be taken for granted, some researchers have felt the need to defend some links with reality against the tendency to treat interview data merely as stories. Roos (1991) has warned against treating accounts of people's lives as they tell them primarily as stories, and he argues that such accounts represent peoples' lived experience and that they should be respected as such. In this context, Hollway and Jefferson (2000) argue the need for a 'critical realism' in that '...though it is far from transparent, there is a relationship between people's ambiguous representations and their experiences' (p. 3). In Bjørnholt (2011), the researcher takes a pragmatic view, mindful of the gap between the 'story told and the life lived', arguing that the (couple) interview data provide 'good enough data' for exploring various aspects of the informants' lives.

## Methods and samples

Our examples in this article are drawn from three studies in which we used qualitative interviews as the sole method of data collection. Both joint and individual interviews with couples were performed in these studies.

*The Work-Sharing Couples Project* was a longitudinal, retrospective life-course study conducted 30 years after an experimental research project of the early 1970s that aimed to promote gender equality in the family within a design that involved both partners working part-time and shift parenting. The couple interviews in the follow-up study were biographical life-course interviews with 14 of the original 16 participating couples covering both their functions as couples and the individual life courses of both partners.<sup>1</sup> In this study, semi-structured, qualitative interviews were carried out in which both partners were present. The aim was to get a broad picture of the whole life course of the participants, including their arrangements for work and care over the entire period. The interviews started by focusing on the couples' common life and experiences, with particular reference to their work-sharing arrangements. The interviews also contained a section covering both partners' individual biographies. In addition to couple interviews with the parents, individual interviews with adult sons were also carried out.

*The 'Care–Career' Study* was a qualitative research project in which a total of 58 families with children under the age of 3 years were interviewed. In the first round of interviews, the parents were interviewed together; in the second round, a sub-sample was interviewed separately and the third round consisted of both joint and individual interviews.<sup>2</sup> These interviews were directed at mapping out the structure and content of the children's everyday life and their 'care career' as they progressed from being cared for at home to going into day care outside the home. The interviewers also explored the motivations and justifications of the parents with regard to the care arrangements in their families.

*Parental Leave in Iceland* is the third study we have drawn on here. In this study, the researcher performed joint interviews with cohabiting parents of children under the age of 2 years. Fourteen couples were interviewed about the ways in which they had organized

parental leave, their plans for the care of their children and their plans to combine work and care in the future. The parents were asked to explain the reasons for making these arrangements and to reflect on possible alternative solutions, and they were also asked about their attitudes towards the childcare benefits granted to them.<sup>3</sup>

While focusing on these three studies, we will discuss four aspects of the joint couple interview. First, we will discuss the ethical aspects of research, which concern securing anonymity and consent in cases where there is more than one person involved. Second, we will illustrate how interview dynamics, including researcher–interviewee interaction and interviewee–interviewee interaction, may contribute to the content and quality of the data and lead to the identification of topics where there is conflict. Third, we will discuss how the joint interview may produce observational data based on couple interaction, and fourth, we will address some practical concerns. Finally, we will discuss our findings in relation to recent advances in family research and theory.

### **Consent, anonymity and control in multi-person cases**

All families have family myths, taboos and secrets that may be revealed to a researcher in an individual interview under the promise of anonymity, but which are not meant to be repeated to other members of the family as they could be of a sensitive nature if revealed. As soon as the individual cases are clustered into dyads, triads, family or kin groups (or any kind of group of people who know each other), anonymity is given up among the informants belonging to the same family or group. Even when all family members have given their consent and have been interviewed, there is still the problem of how to retain confidentiality between family members in the analysis and in the presentation of cases consisting of people who know each other.

When interviewing couples together, the participants have more control over the common story of which they are a part, and the problems of anonymity and consent among interviewees are reduced, as both are present and what is being said is in a ‘public’ setting. The researcher does not become the medium through which confidential and possibly sensitive information about conflicts may be pieced together in ways that may be unintended by the individual participants and which may have a negative impact on their relationship.

The ethical dimension is perhaps one of the most important advantages of a joint interview, if the study is of couples or other multi-person cases. The issue of anonymity and consent among family members or group members has received little consideration, and discussions on anonymity are often limited to anonymity between the researcher and the interviewee and towards an external readership. Brannen et al. (2004) also discuss anonymity between researchers in research teams; however, although their study is an intergenerational study of families, they do not discuss the issue of anonymity between family members who have been interviewed separately.

### **A common reflective space**

In our experience, the joint couple interviews provided rich and valid data related to both couples and individuals, and the chosen method was a productive setting for

telling the stories of both couples and individuals. Later, we will provide some examples of how the context provided by the couple interviews added to the richness and detail of the interviews and how the interaction between couples brought up arguments and topics that may not have been revealed so readily in individual interviews.

### *The production of rich data*

Morgan and Krueger (1993) identify ‘a cueing phenomenon’ that arises when participants in a group interview help each other divulge information. This phenomenon is also found in joint couple interviews, and we discovered that the type of information that this dynamic produces can help add to the richness of the data.

In one of the sequences in the care-career interviews, the parents were asked to draw up a ‘relationship map’ for their 3-year-old child. The parents placed the names of people close to the child in a map made up of concentric circles, with the child’s name in the middle. In these interviews, the parents discussed the composition of this map between themselves, and in many cases, this discussion was just as interesting as the map itself. As the following quote shows, the discussion brought out the mother’s reasoning for where a certain person was placed on the map relative to the child:

*Vigdis:* We could write, like generally the neighbours are here. He knows them right? And his brother has some friends that he kind of has been around. Like [girl’s name] and ...

*Óttar:* Well, do you want to put her in there?

*Vigdis:* Yes, at least she is very fond of him, and I don’t know if he is very close to her ... We just went to the cabin with them and ...

In this case, the father’s questioning spurred the mother to explain why she wanted the neighbourhood girl to be in the map. In these types of sequences, the parents can also fill out each other’s stories together and create a more detailed picture of the relationship between the child and their friends and relatives. The following sequence from another couple illustrates this dynamic:

*Kristian:* And then there’s the neighbour, the one in the day care centre we talked about.

*Halldis:* It’s a bit like, they have not been babysitting in the traditional sense, but like if I had to do something and my husband comes home half an hour late, he can stay there.

*Kristian:* Yes, and [neighbour] can stay here if his sister is going swimming or ...

*Halldis:* Yes and then it’s like, he got some ‘hand-me-down’ clothes and ...

*Kristian:* Yes, but it’s also like, in the summer, everything is easier in the summer. They will run in and out each others houses. Now we are in hibernation, and he will spend less time with them.

*Halldis:* Yes, but I also think he finds it rather cool to hang around with [neighbour] and his older brother.

Another example of where the couple context can be used to open up common reflection and the co-development of arguments can be found in the Work-Sharing Couples Project. Here the couple reflected on how their relationship was affected when changing from a male provider/female carer arrangement, to a more egalitarian arrangement where both worked part-time and shared domestic responsibilities.

*Rita:* I think I also became more attractive to you.

*David:* Yes, you did, I like independent women with a will of their own, and having a job is part of that.

*Rita:* I also became more self-confident and that had an impact on our relationship.

*David:* And I became less confident when you went out to work and met other men, this adds a little to the relationship.

In the Work-Sharing Couples Project, the interview covered both the common life course of the couple and the individual life course of both spouses. It turned out that, even in the individual part of the interview, the presence of both partners sometimes added to the significance of the data. In one case, we were talking about the couple's sharing of domestic responsibility. In the joint part of the interview, they claimed to share this very equally. When the husband was asked about his family origins, the wife said, '*You know, Per was very well brought up*' and then she spoke warmly of his parents and how they had treated him and his sister alike, and how he had been taught domestic skills at home. In this way, his current household skills were confirmed and validated by his wife, who had enjoyed the fruits of his good upbringing, so when mirrored through his wife's comments, his good upbringing and household skills appeared to be much more valid than if he had said the same in an individual interview.

Bringing the partners together for joint reflection may bring out nuances in the data material. One case where the parents got together after taking part in individual interviews exemplifies this point. Here, the interviewer stayed behind for a short while, and during the conversation, the father explained how he had found some of the questions in the interview hard to answer. During the interview, the researcher had noticed that the father had had problems answering more general questions, for example, about his thoughts on the welfare of the child. The mother was more elaborate when answering this type of question, while the father talked more about concrete routines and events in their daily lives. In the discussion that followed the separate interviews, the parents brought up this difference and commented on how this reflected their different focal points in family life in general. The father suggested that this was connected to his wife being more focused on the planning, while he was more involved in the execution of the plans. This difference in focal points between the parents could be deduced from the interviews by the researcher on the basis of individual interviews. However, the discussion following the separate interviews was conducted openly, and the subject could thus be brought to the researcher's attention in a more concrete way.



### *The dynamics of the interview situation*

In addition to providing a common reflective space, a couple interview can reveal patterns of communication between the spouses. Examining the interaction and dynamics within a relationship may provide valuable additional information that can strengthen the knowledge base of the researcher. In some cases, the relationship between researcher and informants may be altered during the interview, placing the researcher in an observer role as the partners conduct discussions among themselves. During the interviews with the work-sharing couples, there were times when one spouse took over the questioning, thus allowing the interviewer to take a back seat and listen to a highly relevant discussion between the two partners. Their turn-taking and communication with each other meant that the picture that emerged of them as a couple was more nuanced.

In the following sequence, a couple are discussing the stress of working outside the home, which in this case is related by the father Gunnar, who compares it to the stress of taking care of the child at home, which had been his wife Margrét's role:

*Gunnar:* Also because, in my defence a little bit ... That ...

*Margrét:* I'm not attacking you ...

*Gunnar:* No but ... You can not compare the two. We are still not trying to compare the two, the stress of taking care of her and the stress of work. [Gunnar goes on explaining]. So it was the most difficult job in the world. If you can ...at least in my ... what do you say, save your self or something ...? Maybe not save but ...

*Margrét:* Defend?

*Gunnar:* Yes defend yourself with something. OK I'm really tired from the work, and of course you are [as well]. And you understand the other one is tired also. But you want to get a little bit more than ...[ ...] Giving me all of it is not right, so one portion would be ok ...[Margrét laughs]

*Gunnar:* What? Am I rambling?

*Margrét:* I think so.

In this case, the couple are communicating with each other as well as with the researcher. Margrét's reaction to Gunnar's statements formed part of the knowledge base and enabled the researcher to learn more about their relationship.

In some instances, the interviews brought up issues that the couple had not discussed between themselves prior to the interview, and these would provide the interviewer with new knowledge of each partner's viewpoint. The following is an extract from an interview taken after the mother, Lisa, had told the interviewer that she found that the relationship between the child and her husband Finn had changed after he had taken his paternity leave:

*Interviewer* [to Finn]: So did you have the same feeling that something changed. Have you noticed that in a way?

*Finn:* Emm, no. I didn't.

*Interviewer:* You haven't discussed this?

- Lisa:* No, no, no.  
*Interviewer:* That's why I'm here.  
*Finn:* Emm, I think it might have changed automatically because until then you were ...  
*Lisa:* Yes, of course, I was breast feeding until ...  
*Finn:* But, yeah, you might be right. I wasn't aware of it, you know, it was all on her shoulder.

In this setting, the interviewer might tap into discussions that are ongoing in a family and that can continue while the interviewer is listening. One example of this is when Anna and Thomas discussed their arrangements for picking up their child from day care. Anna did this every day, even though it meant that she had to finish work very early:

- Anna:* I wish that, you know, the childminder was closer to his work. I could just be dropped off, and they could just ...  
*Thomas:* Well I could go to work at seven o' clock. But I think it sounds extreme to get up at six.  
*Anna:* You can't really leave at three can you?  
*Thomas:* Yeah I could.  
*Anna:* You could!?  
*Thomas:* Yeah ...  
*Anna:* You sure?  
*Thomas:* Yeah ...  
*Anna:* Let's do it!  
*Thomas:* I don't want to wake up at six. That's airport time!

Obviously we do not know if these types of discussions would normally take place outside the interview situation. However, the tone of voice of the participants and the dynamic that was demonstrated between them gave the interviewer a sense of their interaction and the atmosphere in which discussions in this particular family took place.

### *Disagreements brought to the floor*

One of the objections made of joint couple interviews is the assumption that a couple will inevitably strive towards fronting a consistent story when interviewed about their relationship or their experiences in the family sphere. Connected to this perceived flaw is the idea that one of the partners will lead the discussion and that the other partner's side of the story will be overlooked. We do not mean to claim that this situation never occurs in a joint interview, but in our experience, disagreement and discussions do become evident in joint couple interviews. When couples are interviewed together, the questions may touch on subjects upon which they do not agree or where there are ongoing discussions in the family. In a joint interview, conflicts can be debated there and then, and through that process, the researcher can be provided with interesting data.

In one of the interviews with parents of a small child, a discussion arose in which the parents disagreed about the child's daily routines. In this example, the mother explained



how she had established routines with regard to the child's sleep during her maternal leave. When the father started his paternity leave, he was reluctant to adopt the routines she had established, and when the interviewer touched upon this issue a discussion between the parents arose:

- Dora:* Yeah, but that's not what the child needs. The child needs a routine.  
*Jón:* Yeah, yeah, yeah, we don't really agree ...  
*Interviewer:* Yeah, a little bit different focus in that sense, do you think?  
*Dora:* Yeah, well me and the entire literature against him, I think ... Yes, children need a structured routine, it's just that simple, whether or not it suits you.  
*Jón:* Well, I'm ... I agree, but I mean our routine was overly ...  
*Dora:* You just find it difficult that somebody else's routine dictates your day.  
*Jón:* Our routine was overly structured, but maybe it was what was needed because of his sleeping problems.  
*Dora:* It took me eight months of really hard work to get that routine going, so it was really necessary not to ruin it. Because, if the daytime naps would change, then his whole night-sleeping would have changed as well.  
*Jón:* So this is what happens, I mean the mother is, as the primary caregiver for the first few months, first eight months in your case. [She] really sets the routine and kind of decides the routine. So when the father takes over ... [ ... ]  
*Dora:* [interrupts] The child get's hungry at certain hours and sleepy at certain hours and there's nothing to do [about it]!  
*Jón:* You're not taking this seriously!  
*Dora:* Honestly, what you do in between ...  
*Jón:* Anyway, I think it's, I mean I think it's not necessary ...  
*Dora:* What you do in between is completely up to you.

In one of the interviews in the Work-Sharing Couples Project, the couple's interaction revealed controversies or topics that turned out to be delicate, which may even have surprised one of the spouses, as in the example below. In this case, both have the same education and work for the same employer. The wife is a top manager while the husband is a senior advisor. In this part of the interview, the conversation is about how she, despite being a woman, has made it to the top of the organization:

- Vera:* There is no doubt I have had an opportunity in being a woman exactly during this period ...  
*Robert* [eagerly breaks in]: That was exactly what I too wanted to say [laughs] – it is a little mean to say though, but taking into account that there have been so few women [ ... ] there are some who have accused you of it; coming easily to it because you are the right person and the right gender at the right time.  
*Vera:* But you have never accused me of that, I hope [laughs].

Later in the interview, the discussion turned to the fact that she earned more than him:

- Interviewer* [to the wife]: Now you earn more than him?  
*Vera*: Yes.  
*Robert*: Much more – almost double.  
 [Vera tries to break in]  
*Robert*: Oh yes you do.  
*Vera*: [with emphasis] You cannot count, I tell you [laughs].  
*Robert*: Yes I can count, uhm ...  
*Interviewer* [to the husband]: How do you feel about that?  
*Robert* [laughs]: Well, I – how much did I earn? – I earn 450,000 and you 800,000. That is not far from the double [laughs].  
*Vera*: But it mostly goes to taxes you know. But [to her husband] what do you think of it – uhm – about what we just talked about?  
*Robert*: Well, I have to admit that I think it is a little unjust; [turning to the interviewer] I do not think she does such a big job that that justifies her earning twice as much as me. No, I do have some problems with that; if I can say that straightforwardly.

As the examples above illustrate, issues of conflict may be revealed in couple interviews. We cannot know whether these conflicts would have become apparent if these couples had been interviewed separately, but observing the way these conflicts unfolded as part of the exchange between the partners in these interviews gave us rich data that would have been difficult to obtain otherwise. One partner's immediate reaction to the other one's answers could be lost in an individual interview. In the case of Jón and Dora, they disagreed on how to organize the daily routines for the child, and in this quote, Jón openly says, '*we don't really agree*'. Interviewing Jón and Dora separately might have made it possible for the researcher to portray this difference of opinion through her analysis. However, in a joint interview, this information is handed to the researcher by the parents themselves. In addition, the discussion between them gave the researcher rich material about their intra-couple discussions, or even quarrels, that would otherwise not have been exemplified in the same way.

As our examples demonstrate, conflicts and dissent did arise and were expressed within some of the couple interviews. However, what emerges in an interview is limited by what a participant wants to say, and it is not uncommon that the really interesting information comes after the interview is finished and the microphone is switched off. In one case, the couple had been interviewed both together and individually. After the final individual interview with the wife, she accompanied the researcher to the train station and remarked, '*You may have got the impression that everything is in perfect harmony in our family, but it is not!*' This case illustrates that some information may be kept from the researcher, regardless of the context of the interview, and the individual interview in this case did not reveal a more conflicting picture than the one given in the couple interview. We will come back to this point in the following discussion.

## **Couple dynamics – observational data**

In addition to the verbal data from the interview, a joint interview can also produce observational data about how the couple interact. These data may be partly verbal, containing information about the dynamics of the verbal exchange, for example, who speaks about what and how. In addition, an examination of the mere quality of speech, as well as the non-verbal communication that occurs in the interaction, can add observational data that may enrich or fill out the picture given in the interview itself.

One instance of the latter can be seen in the example presented previously of the conflict over the wife's career and higher income. In this case, the husband lowered his voice, almost mumbling the rather harsh views that appear in the excerpt from the interview. His wife spoke in a high and clear voice and was clearly surprised and also curious. The sound and tone of this particular exchange confirmed the impression that this was a highly controversial and delicate topic. In an interview with another couple, the husband spoke most of the time, despite the attempts by the researcher to question the wife directly and obtain her opinion as well. When the husband was asked about his motivation for taking part in the work-sharing arrangement, one of the reasons he gave was the fact that he was generally quite dominant and that his wife needed some autonomy from him. Having stated this, he referred to the interview itself: it was indeed obvious that he dominated the interaction by speaking most of the time. However, he was also clearly capable of being self-reflective, which supported his argument that establishing the work-sharing arrangement was a form of corrective action.

Another example is from an interview with a couple with two young children. Both children were present during the interview. The father was very talkative and expressed strong opinions with regard to childcare policies, the raising of children and their emotional development. The researcher spent about 2 hours in the family home and observed that when the father was talking actively, he was sitting in the same place the whole time, while the mother did all the practical chores connected to the children including feeding and putting them to bed. Although one cannot draw many conclusions about such a short glimpse of their family life, bearing in mind that the interview setting is highly unusual, this still gave the researcher additional knowledge about the interaction in the family. Being in the family home observing the couple, perhaps with other family members, is a way of gathering more insight into the prevailing atmosphere in the family.

Noticing and remembering different aspects of the interview setting is one of many skills in the craft of conducting qualitative interviews. Being two interviewers together in an interview setting may help facilitate greater detail and accuracy in the notes produced following an interview. However, it may not be evident to the participants that these types of observations are part of the data-gathering process, and therefore, some of the information gathered in this way may be left out of the researchers' published material for ethical reasons. Still, this type of information will be beneficial and may constitute part of the knowledge base on which the researcher builds her analysis.

## Practical aspects

Finally, the more mundane aspects of choosing joint interviews should not be left out. For example, it is often easier to arrange a joint interview, and this saves time and money. This is not an irrelevant consideration, as most research projects face material restrictions in terms of time and funding. Choosing to use joint couple interviews in the above-mentioned studies was done for pragmatic reasons. In many cases, it is easier to set up an interview in a couple's home if one can interview the partners together. Carrying out two extensive interviews one after another is time-consuming, both for the family and for the researcher. Finally, conducting joint interviews with couples may be a way of recruiting men/fathers to family studies, as it is often more difficult to recruit men/fathers to separate interviews than women/mothers.

One of the practical conclusions that can be drawn from the projects where parents of infants or toddlers were interviewed is that it can be difficult to have both parents present at the same time as one is likely to be occupied with the child. However, in cases where the interview was done after the child's bedtime, this problem was usually avoided. Not only can it be very time-consuming for parents of young children to take part in two rather long interviews in one single night, but in some cases, it also means shifting around their daily routines to make this possible.

When conducting joint and separate interviews, it was rarely a problem to get hold of both parents. Whatever method we used, we sometimes found that one partner (usually the man) would be reluctant to participate. When carrying out separate interviews, he would be hard to make an appointment with, and in the joint interviews, he would often not be available for various reasons. In some cases, he would even be present in the home but would not take part in the interview. However, these situations happened in only a very few cases. In the Icelandic project, we did not come across any couples where only one parent participated in the interview.

Coming into the family home and being able to meet both parents was a benefit for this project. One of the Icelandic fathers was initially reluctant to participate, but changed his mind when the researcher had the chance to talk with him about the project and when he was given the opportunity to join his wife in the interview setting. This particular father stayed put through the whole interview and participated actively in the discussion. One could imagine that making contact with this father in order to arrange for a separate interview could have been difficult. This might have been a way of motivating him in this particular situation, as he was at home and therefore had the opportunity to join in the conversation.

## Discussion

Although there is not an extensive amount of literature on this topic, we are not alone in acknowledging the advantages of joint interviews with couples. Other researchers have also drawn attention to the advantages of the joint couple interview in studying couple relationships and families (Doucet, 2001; Magnusson, 2006; Martinsson, 1997; Syltevik, 2000; Valentine, 1999). Some argue that joint couple interviews are superior to separate interviews with couples, as they can often provide the most interesting data (Doucet) and

a situation in which conflicts tend to be more openly stated (Martinsson) than in individual interviews. Our data do not allow us to claim the superiority of one over the other, but we have found that the couple interviews did produce very rich data and that the observations of intra-couple dynamics added to the richness of the data.

Valentine (1999) addresses the question of whether household members should be interviewed together or apart and explores the advantages and disadvantages of both methods of interviewing. Valentine found, as we did, that in joint interviews, couples tend to corroborate each others' stories and that this can provide insights into household dynamics in a more effective way than one-to-one interviews. Moreover, Valentine found that couples do challenge and modify each others' narratives, and in this way, the picture presented tends to be more realistic and less idealized. One implication, we argue, is that the added facets that emerge in joint interviews also enhance the link between the story told and the experiences addressed in the interview.

Valentine (1999) is also preoccupied with ethical issues when discussing joint couple interviews. In her experience, troublesome issues may surface in the interview that may deteriorate into 'a full-blown conflict where the interviewer is caught in the cross-fire' (p. 70). This, she argues, may create an ethical minefield for an interviewer. This point is well taken, especially when the possibility that a couple interview may reveal previously unspoken grievances is considered. As in all types of interviews, the researcher must be mindful of not inflicting harm, and the couple interview is no exception. If conflicts surface, the researcher must be careful not to side with one of the partners or present the conflict in written form in a way that may appear offensive to one party. However, we would also assert that there are strong arguments *for* interviewing couples together on the basis of ethical considerations. This is especially evident in those studies where the research interest is the couple as a unit and where the alternative is to use individual interviews to discuss a couple's relationship. In such cases, the ethical challenge is to present data along with information derived from a one-on-one setting. Despite researchers' efforts to conceal the participants' identity, it is hard to avoid the possibility that participants will recognize themselves, their partner or other participants in an interview segment. Interviewing couples together, and addressing possible differing viewpoints or disagreements through the interview, makes the research focus more evident to the participants and may thus diminish the role of the researcher as a keeper and mediator of secrets.

Finch argues that as families have become more fragmented (Smart and Neale, 1999) and to an increasing extent are the result of negotiated relations (Finch and Mason, 1993) rather than entities that can be taken for granted, they have become increasingly contingent. As a result, the notion of *displaying family* has become important in constituting families. In an article already considered to be seminal, Finch (2007) launched this concept as a further development of Morgan's (1996) concept of family practices and other related concepts that emphasize the relational and active 'doing' of families and relations.

According to Finch (2007), family relationships need to be displayed in order for them to demonstrate their social reality, and the core message of displaying family is 'these are my family relationships, and they work'. Her definition of 'display' puts the emphasis on social interaction and particularly the processes whereby social meanings



are conveyed, as keys to understanding how display works in practice (p. 73). In her article, Finch invited others to explore, develop and expand on the concept, and this was soon picked up and put to use by other researchers into family life (Dermott and Seymour, 2011). So far, few have discussed the concept of displaying family from a methodological perspective. We find that the concept is of particular interest in relation to the topic in this article and that it may add to our understanding of what goes on in joint research interviews with couples. In our view, the open discussions and even disagreements that occurred in our interviews may very well be seen as part of couples' self presentation or 'family display' (Finch, 2007).

In a country where the ideal of gender equality is shared by a large majority, revealing the different opinions the partners have may be a crucial element in the makeup of displaying families and relationships. While in the original article, Finch was primarily preoccupied with the concept of displaying family as a constitutive practice among family members themselves, other authors have been especially interested in her concept of emphasizing the importance of external audiences, as pointed out by Dermott and Seymour (2011) in the introduction to their recent collected volume.

We suggest that the joint couple interview can be seen as a specific setting for family display, in which the researchers become one of the many audiences to whom the family is being displayed. Thus, a qualitative interview can be seen as an arena in which a couple can convey the way they 'do' family, by focusing on the characteristics and qualities of their relationships and the social meaning embedded in this. Thus, what happens in the research interview should not necessarily be seen as an activity external to the family context, where the researcher extracts knowledge of a family's life that basically unfolds outside of the context of the interview. By interviewing couples together, the researcher can observe family display as one of the core practices that constitute families. This is a great advantage over undertaking separate interviews, which do not allow the same access to family practices.

While the discussion so far has illustrated the possible benefits of the joint couple interview, one must realize that no method is perfect. A relevant question to pose is whether the joint couple interview fits better with some families' display than others. While some couple interviews are vibrant and disclose both partners' ways of communicating, other interviewees may be more taciturn. Whether these interviews also represent the couple's way of displaying family, or whether other methods would open up more communication, is hard to determine. One solution could be to interview the partners together and separately within the same design. A question for further discussion is the extent to which the 'good interview subject' is more easily found in specific groups of people, within certain family cultures so to speak, that are more concordant with the joint couple interview.

## Conclusion

We have found that there are several arguments for interviewing couples together in research where couples or families are indeed the unit under investigation. First, the joint interview can solve the problems of anonymity and consent among interviewees in cases that involve more than one person. This could possibly be extended to other case studies



involving joint interviews, as well as those which involve couples. Second, joint interviews can be seen to provide a common reflective space that contributes to the production of rich data, both in terms of extensions and corroborations, as well as in bringing disagreements to the floor. Third, observing a couple's behaviour and their interaction in the interview situation can add to the richness of the data. Fourth, the joint interview has a number of practical advantages which we have highlighted; these are in terms of arranging the interview and setting up an appointment, in making sure men take part, and in saving time and money. Defending the position of 'critical realism' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000), we also conclude that the more elaborate, contested and multifaceted stories produced in the joint interview may represent richer data on couples' and families' lives than individual stories told in separate interviews. Taking a relational view of the self as a starting point, we also argue that stories told in a real-life context with important others present can frequently provide a better picture of a relationship than individual stories about the relationship. Finally, we have found the concept of family display, as proposed by Finch (2007), particularly useful in understanding what goes on in joint couple interviews. This concept adds to our understanding of and the possible meaning of what couples 'do' in an interview. It also helps provide insight into the relationship between the researcher and the researched, where the researcher may be seen as one of the many possible audiences for family display. This concept can also add to our understanding of the range of observational data that a joint interview provides, allowing a researcher to observe the core practices that can be seen to be constitutive of a family.

Our studies reside within the field of family and gender research. Our specific focus has been on work and care, with couples and families as the research unit; and we believe that this type of research may benefit from the methodology of the joint couple interview. We think that joint interviews may also be a viable, and in some cases, preferable option beyond the family and couple context. We claim that joint interviews with interviewees who share some kind of personal relationship should be recognized as a separate form of the qualitative research interview, and it is our hope that other researchers will contribute to its further exploration and that future textbooks on qualitative research methods will give due attention to the joint interview as a particular interview form.

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## Notes

1. Details of the sample and methods are described in Bjørnholt M (2009, 2010).
2. Details of the sample and methods are described in Farstad GR (2010).
3. For details, see Farstad GR (in press).

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