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“\textit{I hope we are not boring you?}”

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Sevasti-Melissa Nolas

The Connectors Study has coincided with me becoming a mother and the first 18-months of fieldwork in London started when my son was around 18-months old. The intensity of the fieldwork often left me feeling like I was putting in a ‘third shift’: (Hochschild, 1989): the desk based aspects of my job during the day bookended by my own family life, and then extended by participant-observation with other families usually in the afternoons or weekends. Organising fieldwork effectively meant coordinating 15 family diaries including my own to find time to spend with the children in the study over an 18-month period.

There are very serious discussions to be had around ‘balancing’ working life and family life, especially for women, and I’m certainly not the first to experience the difficulties and inequities of trying to do so (and sadly won’t be the last). In the meantime, bodies that haven’t slept will do what they do as I experienced one Saturday afternoon.

My son was a baby that didn’t sleep - or more accurately slept in spurts of 45 minutes to 2 hours at a stretch each night for roughly the first 12 months, and erratically during the day until getting into a routine of naps. The ‘spurts’ did eventually get longer but even now I haven’t had an uninterrupted night’s sleep in over 4 years. My partner and I used to get through weekends on the knowledge that he would at least reliably nap for two hours in between 12-2pm - I’m not sure how I got through the week days. So, fieldwork, which often happened at the weekends, came at a time of cumulative and ongoing sleep deprivation for me.

One Saturday, during the first visit to a family, I heard the words no researcher ever wants
to hear. I had arrived at the family home around 10.30am. The previous night had been a particularly bad night’s sleep. According to my fieldnotes I had been up between 1-3am so I was on about 5 hours of interrupted sleep. Not wanting to reschedule a first visit I caffeinated and made my way to the other side of the city. On arrival, I gratefully accepted the next cup of coffee that was offered and spent the morning with Andrew, a 6-year-old boy, who showed me his toys and books; we played, we drew, and we had lunch together.

After lunch Andrew’s mum Lorna was showing me his Year 1 reading books. It was around 1.30pm by this point and that elusive second wind was yet to blow. I found myself flagging, and as I sat on the sofa next to Andrew and Lorna my eyes must have glassed over. I had a split second of tuning out, or as I wrote in my fieldnotes a few days later ‘my mind just stopped’. My eyelids felt heavy and all I wanted to do is curl into a little ball on their sofa and sleep. Lorna’s next words shook me awake abruptly: ‘I hope we are not boring you?’ she asked in what I have since come to know as her keen sense of humour. No, no, not at all, I think I managed to muster, followed by a quick ‘my son didn’t sleep well last night’, in what I can only hope came out as a reassurance of my interest.

I left the family home around 2pm that day and promptly fell asleep on the train back to Waterloo.

References

Dr Sevasti-Melissa Nolas is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. She is the Principal Investigator of the ERC funded Connectors Study. Melissa has an interdisciplinary background in the social sciences and has been carrying out multimodal ethnographic and other qualitative research since 2000 focusing on human agency and everyday life. Previous research has engaged critically with the topics of child, youth and family welfare, well-being, and social support. Her current research explores the relationship between childhood and public life and political activism across the life course. ORCiD: 0000-0001-6928-7001