Feeling Is Knowing: Maternal Experience and the Future of Social Science

Natalia A. James
PhD Candidate, School of Law, Politics and Sociology, University of Sussex, United Kingdom
nj231@sussex.ac.uk | nataliajames1990@hotmail.co.uk
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/natalia-james-b75b6569/
Profile: https://profiles.sussex.ac.uk/p549444-natalia-james/about

Keywords: *maternal epistemology, surveillance, feminist methodology, SEND, participatory research*

I was an angry mum long before I became a PhD researcher. When my daughter Izzy started secondary school, we were introduced to the school's chosen behaviour-tracking platform, and I immediately followed the instructions to log in. This felt like progress. I could now stay updated in real time on Izzy's school day, something I had previously relied on Izzy for. With the usual questions after school, like 'How was your day?' and her often-used responses of 'Can't remember!'. I recall primary school, where we were mostly kept up to date during annual parents' evenings. This new platform felt exciting and quickly became an obsession, with frequent checks throughout the day. However, Izzy has ADHD and Dyslexia, which bring significant challenges at school. It wasn't long before the platform, mainly used by staff to log both positive and negative behaviour points, began to feel less like a tool for parent engagement and communication. It soon weighed on me, flooding my thoughts. It was no longer just a tool to check on my daughter at school, but a surveillance device. Constantly reminding me that my child showed negative behaviour and needed control and punishment, not support and understanding.

For a long time, I accepted institutional discomfort like many working-class mothers, believing schools needed monitoring systems and that my feelings lacked legitimacy. I was merely a mother caring and worrying, and that didn't count.

But I was wrong about that. Not about the feeling, the feeling was right. I was wrong about its status. My worry was not overprotection or overreaction. It was a precise and accurate reading of something real, a distinct power operating on my child and me. I simply hadn't allowed myself the permission to trust it yet.

Then, whilst in my second year at university as a mature student, I encountered Foucault. I want to be careful here because I do not want this to be a story about academia saving me. The language of academic texts remained, and often still remains, a wall. Impenetrable, confusing and complex, with words I have never seen before. Texts seemingly written for audiences who already belong. As a working-class woman returning to education after more than a decade, I learned quickly that difficulty was sometimes a marker to challenge me to grow and learn, and other times just a closed door, firmly bolted shut. Learning to tell the difference was its own kind of emotional and cognitive labour and something I still battle with, even after receiving a first-class BA and an MSc distinction.

But Foucault's (1977) ideas nonetheless were something else entirely. Surveillance. Disciplinary power. Normalisation. The ways institutions produce and manage bodies and behaviours. The examination as a mechanism that simultaneously measures and judges. Listening to lectures on Foucault and reading his ideas, I felt an immediate shift. A truly lightbulb moment. This anger I had been carrying around on this school platform suddenly took on architecture. I wasn't just an annoyed parent. I was someone who had identified a structure of power operating on my family and hadn't had the concepts to name it. Foucault did not create my knowledge or validate it from above. What he offered was language, a set of concepts that helped me articulate what I had already, in my body, as a mother, correctly understood. The knowledge was never absent; it was waiting for the words and permission. That moment when your own lived experience was suddenly illuminated through critical thinking was no small thing. It set me on a trajectory that led me down an academic path I would never have dreamed of. I would argue that it is one of the most radically democratising things education can do. Then it prompted a persistent question: what happens to the parents and young people who never get that moment? Do we continue to swallow our pain and frustration as institutions and society continue to systematically devalue maternal knowing?

What I didn't fully understand at the time was that my self-doubt ran far deeper than a single platform or a single school. I had not just been taught to distrust my knowledge. I had been taught to distrust my entire way of finding it. Miller-McLemore (1992), drawing on Belenky (1986), argues that women learn to doubt not only what they know but how they go about knowing – the very process through which they make sense of the world. For mothers, this begins long before secondary school platforms. It starts in pregnancy, when our bodies' signals are routinely mediated, managed and second-guessed by institutions. This continues through early childhood, as health visitors and professionals become the judges of whether our instincts are correct. By the time our children reach secondary school, we have had more than a decade of careful, systematic training in deferring our knowledge to those with

credentials. We learn gradually and often without even noticing, handing over authority over our children's lives to people who know them through systems or at a glance, while we, who know them through living, are repositioned as concerned, emotional, and even difficult parents.

This is not incidental to any one mother's story; it is a structural feature of the knowledge institutions built to be trusted. Read alongside Foucault (1977), it suggests that disciplinary power does not only monitor bodies; it also ranks and legitimises ways of knowing, deciding whose account of a child counts as evidence and whose is merely sentiment.

Yet I knew Izzy before the school did, understanding how her ADHD and anxiety showed at home versus at school. I recognised her struggles and the difference between a tough day and a problem with the system. But that deep, nuanced knowledge wasn't an option on the app. When the platform reduced her to a pie chart of negative behaviour, my maternal instinct knew something was wrong. That chart didn't reflect my daughter or her complex needs. Yet this knowledge, a highly attuned epistemological response, had been conditioned by years of institutional devaluation, leading it to be dismissed as irrational and overprotective.

The families I now research, parents and carers and their children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) navigating digital behaviour-tracking platforms in English secondary schools, are possibly where I once was. They have feelings they cannot always name. They might feel uncomfortable about how their children are described in data. A sense that the app is not working for them and their child, even though they are told it is. Some might be frustrated, and some might feel resigned. Some might have even found ways to push back and resist. Regardless, all of them are living something that critical theory has a lot to say about. Yet, most of them will never read that theory.

This is the tension I carry into my research. My PhD sits within an academic institution. It might result in journal publications, and findings will be presented at conferences. However, the families who make all that possible, and the families beyond it who need to hear it, will likely never encounter it. Traditional social science has long congratulated itself on studying marginalised people while remaining largely inaccessible to them. If I am not careful, my research will reproduce the very gatekeeping I critique.

Yet, I do not think the academy is only that. It was, after all, an academic encounter that gave me the words for what I already knew, and the credibility to say it aloud. If the same institution gatekeeps, it is also one of the few places currently resourced to take maternal and family knowledge seriously enough to fund listening to it. The question I am left with is then, not whether the academy is redeemable, but whether that access can be

widened, rather than kept for those who happen to find their way as I did. So, what does the future of social science look like, for me, from here?

I think it looks like relational research that reciprocates throughout the process, not just an abstract commitment to impact and knowledge exchange buried in a research proposal. Feminist research traditions have long argued that the relationship between researchers and participants is not a neutral transaction. It is an encounter that carries ethical weight. I want to take that seriously methodologically. To ask not just what families can tell me, but what the research encounter might offer them. Not from the point of a presumed hierarchical act of 'giving' but through the belief that participants already hold the knowledge of their reality, and that through collaboration and dialogue, a critical consciousness can emerge.

What if the methods I choose could be an aspect of critical reflection, not just data extraction? What if the participants left the process with a new way of thinking about something they had only felt before? Not because I lecture them on theory, but because the methods I use and the questions I ask about power, data surveillance, and the effects of what is recorded and whose voice shapes it open something up. Gives their feelings a new frame.

I propose that a feminist social science has tools: creative methods, participatory approaches, and dialogic encounters that can make the research process itself a site of critical consciousness. When people are asked the right questions, in conditions of genuine care and reciprocity, something can shift. Not because I bring knowledge to them, but because the encounter creates space for what they already know to become nameable. This is not a new idea: it draws on a longer tradition of co-production and participatory research, in which researchers who adopt these expanded conceptions of knowledge view their research as an endeavour that attempts to create the conditions for shared learning between the researchers and participants, with the aim of contributing not only to research but also to social justice and change (Phillips et al., 2022). This shift is not a lesser form of knowing - it is knowing on people's own terms, in their own lives and about their own realities. The future of social science might not lie in more sophisticated data but in more honest and humble encounters. In this case, sitting with other parents and trusting what they already hold.

I became a PhD researcher because a set of ideas illuminated my life, recognising my feelings as legitimate knowledge and giving myself permission to say so. Feelings worth expressing, hearing, and valuing. Now, I wonder if my research can do that for others—not in journals or theses, but in real moments during the process. Social science, for me, should be for everyday people, not just those with academic language, qualifications, and resources. Perhaps its future depends on remembering that.

References

Belenky, M. F. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: the development of self, voice and mind*. Basic Books.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. Allen Lane.

Miller-McLemore, B. J. (1992). Epistemology or bust: A maternal feminist knowledge of knowing. *The Journal of Religion, 72*(2), 229–247. https://doi.org/10.1086/488865

Phillips, L., Christensen-Strynø, M. B., & Frølunde, L. (2022). Thinking with autoethnography in collaborative research: A critical, reflexive approach to relational ethics. *Qualitative Research, 22*(5), 761-776. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211033446