In conversation with Ann Oakley (recorded at the Research Methods Festival, St Catherine's College, Oxford 7 July 2010)

[Jackie Scott]

The first thing to note is that you might have noticed that Dawn Lyon isn't with us tonight unfortunately, though on my left is [Graham Crow]. Graham really doesn't need any introduction as the organiser of this research methods festival and he is also the Deputy Director of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, so Professor of Sociology at Southampton. And his most recent book was on the art of sociological argument, so I think he's going to be very well qualified to play his part tonight. And he has also been studying researchers in the research process and particularly some of the ethical issues around that, so that is the angle that he will be coming from.

Ros Edwards is Professor in Social Policy and Head of the Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research at South Bank University and she has particularly got a great expertise in a whole range of qualitative methods as well as combining quant and qual methods. And I think she'd say her main research area has been around the theme of family lives. She has carried out a whole variety of research on family policy issues and is currently working on a project on children and young people's sibling and friendship relations and that is part of the Timescapes project. And she's also been carrying out a historical comparative analysis of family and parenting.

And then Peter Davis is the person who has travelled farthest to be with us tonight, he has come for us from the University of Auckland where he is Professor of Sociology and Health and Wellbeing and he crosses appointments in statistics and in public health. And his knowledge of Ann goes back to when she was invited as an expert in the wake of some of the ethics scandals which some of you might remember going back to 1989 in Auckland, an ethics scandal that has had ramifications I think going right through to today. So there is going to be lots and lots of issues coming up from us.

And the format I was going to follow for tonight is just asking our panel first to just reflect on some of the questions that they have got for Ann, and some of the sort of challenges that they would like to bring up and then invite Ann to respond to that and then open this up and see how far we can get with this conversation tonight.

So let me turn first to Peter if I may.

[Peter Davis]

Now thank you very much. Yes, I met Ann back in 1989 when she was really an inspired choice because she reassured the community of women and at the same time - and this is really where I come in - she also had a track record in high-quality medical research because she came from the [perinatal epidemiology unit] at Oxford. And so, from my point of view, what is striking is the fact that she has championed the use of randomized controlled trials and the like, which is something a little bit unexpected from somebody with her value position of being a strong feminist advocate. And the fascinating thing here is, and she might confirm this or otherwise, but I think she had a sort of personal kind of "road from Damascus" experience when she discovered that there was this hormone supposedly for the prevention of miscarriage called DES [Diethylstilbestrol, a synthetic form of the female hormone estrogen]. Women were taking it on the basis of studies using historical controls that seemed to show that it was effective. Yet later on that drug had to be withdrawn because randomized controlled trials showed that, not only was the drug not effective, but it had long-term ill effects.

I think that this may have convinced Ann that a feminist position was not necessarily incompatible with this kind of methodology because actually it underpins some absolutely essential evidence that women needed to know - and resulted in changes in policy subsequently.

I've just got two questions. Firstly, one of the things that Ann has done - and I have only just recently discovered this - is that not only did she undertake randomized controlled trials; in fact when she came to Auckland she spoke about using a midwifery intervention and carrying out a randomized controlled trial to see whether a midwifery intervention ante-natally made a difference to health outcomes. I mean that was pretty remarkable. But I hadn't appreciated that since then she has tried to integrate qualitative evidence also into the randomized controlled trial methodology. Now I'd like her to tell us a little bit about whether that has become accepted and what value it's added, and whether we've done enough in that area to move beyond the rather "masculinist" simplicity of the conventional randomized controlled trial to something that has a little bit more of a contextual and qualitative nature.

And so that is my first question.

My second question relates to when she established, or has been associated with, her current position at the EPPI Centre, which is really about high-

quality systematic reviews and evaluation work. There is a paper here in Evidence and Policy where she reviewed twenty-two educational studies and found that half of them did not adequately describe the methods or the sampling. And she says this is a considerable indictment of the state of social science research - and I'd like to ask her if she still stands by that comment.

That publication was in 2005. Yes, 2005 ["The politics of evidence and methodology", *Evidence and Policy*, 2005]. So I'm wondering - is she still as worried as she was then about the standard of evaluation-type research?

So those are my two fundamental questions.

[Jackie Scott]

Ann are you okay with us sort of opening this right up and then responding or do you want to come back to Peter straightaway?

[Ann Oakley]

Well I could go home now or I could go home a bit later,

[Jackie Scott]

That's not an option,

[Ann Oakley]

Okay well, no I am taking notes, you carry on,

[Jackie Scott]

Great

[Ros Edwards]

Okay, well I hope you will excuse me speaking from notes but I first became aware of Ann Oakley and of your work as a mature student working towards my first degree in the early 1980s and it wasn't so much the substantive topics that were important to me although I was reading about housework and giving birth and so on and it was all very relevant to my life as a wife and mother as Jackie said. But what was particularly significant to me was the way that reading for example an academic book like 'Subject Women' alongside the autobiographical 'Taking it Like a Woman', that made me aware that

there wasn't just this other perspective on life but also another way of creating knowledge.

So along with other feminist writers your work stimulated a critical and relational feminist perspective. It's a lens that I still look at the world through and it meant that I didn't just take what my tutors said as the only way of understanding things. So I felt able to challenge for example being taught about Roland Barthes' theory of narrative suspense as the equivalent of striptease, I could challenge that as rooted in a masculine perspective. And later on when I was doing my PhD that other perspective that you've been part of initiating, that allowed me to publish an article, that was a partial challenge to some of your ideas in your chapter on 'interviewing women: a contradiction in terms', in sort of leaving aside cross cutting issues like social issues like race and ethnicity in particular.

And for many feminist researchers of my generation your piece on interviewing women was enormously important though I think you came later to feel that its impact was too great in ways that you hadn't necessarily meant. And that equation of feminist research with qualitative methods that you criticized in the ensuing debate and in fact when I mentioned to colleagues that I was going to be part of this conversation and I solicited their views on what they'd ask you if they had the chance. Again and again the questions they raised related to the idea of feminist research and methods.

So does she think there is anything such as feminist research in this day and age? Does she see a future for feminist research? Does she think that feminist research is still involved in paradigm wars?

When I read some of your work and interviews in preparation for this session I began to wonder if you were a feminist researcher in the way that might be implied in such questions and it seemed to me that your driver was more about making a difference to provide knowledge for useful intervention and it seems to me that maybe feminism is important in this in that in identifying where intervention for women may be of benefit but somehow not necessarily as feminist research outside or beyond that intervention.

So one question from me is can you enlighten me? Is the question about feminist research relevant to how you think or would you recommend asking another sort of question on that topic?

And building on that, another issue that I wondered about was, what sort of process of research as able to have impact are you working with. So sometimes in my revisiting your work it seemed to me that you had quite a straightforward view of the process, you know, one does reliable research that is rooted in a democratic way of knowing that then translates into policy and practice intervention and creates towards a better society.

So is that right? Or do you see the relationship between, or how do you see the relationship between research and policy and the nature of society? And just quickly to take that a little bit further in two different ways, firstly does that relate to the women's movement or do you feel there is still one to be part of? If so what are the ignored issues that you think the movement should be focussing on. And then secondly is there any similarity between your vision of the relationship between research policy and the nature of society and that of the current HEFCE impact agenda.

[Graham Crow]

I think my questions are going to be shorter and perhaps easier to answer so you may say I'll start with these ones. You were interviewed in the 1980's by Bob Mullan in a book 'Sociologists on Sociology' and I think you said you wouldn't have done that if you'd known you'd be the only woman who was interviewed in that book. But one of the questions that you were asked then was about the reception of your work and you made the comment that the things that you were sort of best known for weren't necessarily the things that you felt were your best works. So twenty five or more years on, I wonder is that's sort of still your opinion and whether you could reflect on how that happens that some of the things that you regard as your best work aren't necessarily the things that you, you know are best known, most cited, most talked about and so on.

And we were speaking earlier and I was mentioning that I'm an external examiner of the undergraduate sociology degree programme at Bristol and was delighted to see that one of the exam questions was a quote from Gender on Planet Earth and it was this: '"Who we are is what we are and what we are is monstrous." Discuss.' That was on a course on sociology and the environment and that quote comes out of a discussion about you know the future of planet earth and so on. So my second related question to the one about, you know, your work that is most well-known standing in comparison to the work which you regard as your best is about really the sort

of writing styles and writing processes and speaking for different audiences and I suppose with that particular quote, is that something that you worked and worked and reworked or is that a style that sort of flows from your pen or your word processor? Because it is a sort of distinctive style of rather pithy phrase that does lend itself to people teaching courses, they think 'well I need some exam questions I know I will go to Ann Oakley's book and pick one or two of these quotes out and put discuss at the end and the job will be done'. So it's really about writing styles and engagement with different audiences.

[Ann Oakley]

Well I that's quite a lot in those few minutes, and I have been taking notes, perhaps I'll hopefully I can answer kind of several questions at once, and I think I will start at the end, I will start with Graham.

I think it's very nice that bits of my work are being set, as exam questions, I had never thought of myself as a writer of exam questions so that's a new identity for me. It is often said of people who publish a lot that they must find writing easy. And it is not true. Writing is the most difficult thing that I do. But I make myself do it. I enjoy the process even though it's difficult. And I have, as several of you have noted, over my life written in different, used different formats, actually sometimes to transmit the same ideas.

So I know that the, we can't see them, well I can't see them from where I am but behind me [on the screen] are some of the things that I have written, and there is you know the idea of writing fiction as opposed to writing fact, you might think that fiction and fact are very different things but actually that is one of the binary oppositions that I would very much challenge from the experience of having tried to do both. In one of my novels there is an extract from an interview that I did for an ESRC project, nobody has spotted it, but it's a direct quote from an interview and it's not presented as an interview it's presented as conversation between two of the characters in a novel. And I'm, you know there are other aspects of the fiction that I've done which are simply a way of trying to communicate some of the same ideas that come out of research. 'The Men's Room' which was the first novel of mine that was published and unfortunately was the one that has got the most attention though that is part of the answer to the question about, is your best known work the work that you are most proud of, I don't think 'The Men's Room' is a particularly good novel, it was turned into a television series, to my utter

horror. But there are conversations in that which similarly are themes that have come out of the research.

I think in terms of research methods, I think that the book that I am most proud of is a book that probably nobody has read, nobody in this room has read and that is a book called 'Women Confined'. The subtitle is towards a sociology of childbirth, and it was a companion volume to, (ah, somebody has read it! [in response to comment from audience]), it's a companion volume to the volume 'Becoming a Mother' which was later republished with the title 'From Here to Maternity' leading some people to review it twice thinking it was a different book and actually it wasn't and they didn't even notice that.

So 'Women Confined' is a quite, takes quite a quantitative, statistical approach to the stories that women had told me about their experience of having a first baby. And I built out of that a model of childbirth not as a female or feminine experience but as a human experience, and what I concluded from this evidence was that we can only understand women's reactions to childbirth by understanding them as human beings. For example, you think about the kind of thing that happens when you have a baby, you are institutionalized, you lose your identity, you often have surgery, your body is cut about, you have to start a new job for which you've had no training at all, and you begin with sleep deprivation. You have a complete occupational career change, a lot of stresses, and each one of these things is, there is a literature on. There is as literature about how human beings respond to these kinds of events. And none of that had been applied to women and post-natal depression which was the, still is quite an issue in the medical literature.

So the explanation for why women get depressed was there is something wrong with them, it's their psychology you know they didn't have a good relationship with their own mothers or some other thing to do with the dynamics of interpersonal relationships or something wrong with their hormones. But what actually the women were saying and what I was trying to convey in this book was something quite different which is we are all human beings and when these kinds of things happen to us we have these kinds of reactions. Is it really surprising that you want to climb the wall when these sorts of things happen to you, you don't need to come up with all sorts of esoteric ideas about things that are circulating in your blood stream to explain this.

And I don't think that that book got the attention that I would have liked it to have done, in terms of, it's not about you want good reviews, you want big sales, it is not about that, it's about improving the understanding amongst the people on the ground who actually provide care for women after childbirth, and understanding for families that are there and should be providing support.

So that's one answer to the question about whether my best known work is the work that I'm most proud of. The 'interviewing women' paper is probably the most quoted thing that I have done and I didn't even want to write that, I was asked to write it by somebody, a colleague at the time, Helen Roberts. And I'm glad that I wrote it but I think that it has been over-used in the sense that like many other things that I've done in my life you know I found myself doing something, I looked in the social science, in the methods literature for guidance about how to do it and I found this extraordinary model of what you should do when you interviewed someone, you know you should behave like someone who wasn't a person, who didn't answer questions, you had to keep your own personality back and you had to get the person you were interviewing to tell you all of these things about themselves.

And I can remember very vividly, particularly one woman who asked me at the end of the interview she said can I ask you a question and I said yes unwisely and she said could you tell me which hole the baby comes out of, 1974 this was, and I thought, if I was behaving like the textbooks said I would say well and change the subject or say I can't really answer that and I thought why can you not. There is a woman who is absolutely scared who knows nothing about childbirth who is about to have a baby and she asks you that kind of question. So it made me think.

Feminist research, I don't think that I have ever thought of myself as a feminist researcher and you, I think, got to that point in thinking what I might say.

I have thought of myself as somebody who starts with a question, a research question, and tries to find the right way of answering that question. And some of the questions that I've been interested in, not all, have been suggested to me by my life and the lives of other people, friends that I have known. And they have been about topics that are of concern to women. And in that sense it's feminist research and in another sense it's feminist research in that I have tried to listen to women's voices. But I've done other projects, I once actually

interviewed men, believe it or not, fathers, and I tried to listen to them as well.

So, for me, good social research which involves collecting data from other people is about listening and it's about focusing on topics of concern to the people who are providing you with the data. And I think a lot of masculinist research which is the opposite of feminist research is actually like that too, but it is women, it is feminist researchers who have sensitized I think the research community to the need to be relevant and to listen.

I, so we are getting towards the beginning of this, this notion that something happened to me, something unfortunate happened to me, I had some kind of – you can hear the football, I like that [reference to noise from adjacent room where a World Cup match was being shown on television] – some unfortunate conversion experience. So I was actually I was once at a conference in Sweden and somebody stood up and said well there is the old Oakley and the new Oakley and there is no relationship between the two. And she said and I don't like the new one, I like the old one. And I don't have a sense of - well I have a sense of myself as being an old Oakley yes – but I don't have a sense of there being this huge discrepancy between what I did at the beginning and what I did in the middle and what I am doing now. And I actually naively I suppose, I am, I do feel surprised still that people find it kind of quaint and curious and disturbing that somebody who says yes I think good research is about talking to people and listening to them. It doesn't seem to me a contradiction to say I am also interested in doing research which will help to ensure that the things that other people do to people in the interests of their health and wellbeing are going to do them more good than harm. So there is a whole tranche of research which is about interventions, all of us have interventions in our lives all the time. Social workers, doctors, … educationalists, there are a lot of experts who know what to do, who think they know what to do to improve our wellbeing. And Peter is right that the example of the, that little table which Iain Chalmers who started the Cochrane Collaboration which some of you will know about, which is an organization well I won't tell you what it is, you either know or you can find out, but anyway, when I was working with a group of medical researchers in Oxford I saw this little table that Iain Chalmers produced which shows that women had been given this hormone and in large numbers, I mean thousands and thousands of them and in lots of countries, on using the evidence from these historical case control studies which suggested that women who had

been given this hormone, this was I think the main use then, of DES was in the prevention of recurrent miscarriage. Women who had had several miscarriages would be given DES and then if they had a live baby they, afterwards it was always said that is because they were given DES. So and when you looked at the evidence in this way it suggested that the hormone was a good idea. When you looked at the evidence of randomized controlled trials in which the women receiving DES were the same kinds of women socially as the ones who were not receiving DES you saw that the opposite was true, that it actually reduced the chances that they would have a live baby. And the tail end of the story which some of you will know Diethylstilbestrol (which is DES) is this hormone which causes in some cases a vaginal cancer in the daughters of the women who have taken it during pregnancy. So this was a story that went on, and so there was an even more cogent long-term reason why it was necessary to be very clear about the evidence on which this intervention was based.

And although that is an example about a drug, a pharmacological intervention, the same kinds of criteria apply to how you judge the effectiveness of all sorts of other interventions. Hence the need for good experimental research, and hence the need for anybody who is interested in feminist research to be interested in those kinds of studies as well. So I don't see, I don't see a contradiction, although I know a lot of people do.

So I'm going to shut up, and I hope we can get some conversation going.

[Jackie Scott]

What I would welcome is opening this up to the audience but not simply having just a question and an answer because I think it's going to be more useful to gather up several questions or points people want to make and then again to throw this open to Ann or to other members of the panel here to respond and to continue the conversation.

Could I also just say thanks to John as well for having expertly paced us through this stupendous output [referring to the slides on the screen showing covers of Ann Oakley's publications] so I was really glad...

[Ann Oakley]

Most of them are out of print,

[Jackie Scott]

If this is writing that doesn't come easily this is really, I will have to ask you a question about work life balance I think as well.

[Ann Oakley]

No, don't,

[Jackie Scott]

If the helpers could take mikes around, who would like to kick us off?

I'm trying to see against the light here if anybody –

One in the front row,

Would you just introduce yourself, I mean [Harvey Goldstein],

[Harvey Goldstein]

That's correct, University of Bristol, I want to stay with randomised controlled trials for a little bit Ann. Do you think it's fair to say that in some quarters and some people might think that the Cochrane Collaboration is one of these, that the usefulness of randomised controlled trials has been a little bit over sold, as the only way in which to gain knowledge about what works and what doesn't work? And I am thinking particularly of things like the Campbell Collaboration and in the social sciences generally where it's incredibly difficult to do randomised controlled trials where there are examples of randomised controlled trials that haven't worked very well for reasons which are partly practical but also partly methodological and even theoretical. And I detect now certainly within the methodological social science community a turning away from what some people might call an obsession with randomised controlled trials as the gold standard, the only gold standard towards attempting to get a deeper understanding of how you can make causal inferences from non-randomised data. So that's rather a long question but you can see where I'm coming from, you know where I'm coming from, but I'd be interested in your comments on that.

[Jackie Scott]

If we could take a couple more questions so again you can field the ones you like of these,

Over here?

Well I'd like to widen that out a little and I mean you talk about a uniting goal of emancipatory social science and you talk a great deal about evidence and so in some of following on from what Harvey was talking about by focussing on RCTs as a sort of gold standard, it seems to me that when you are writing more freely, as in Gender on Planet Earth, for example, then the evidence that you are drawing on is really extraordinarily broad, and so this notion of putting evidence on a hierarchy really in terms of, I mean there seems to me to be a 'fit' question, whether the evidence is suitable for the question, but not necessarily this is the best source of evidence full stop. So again possibly just trying to elaborate on the nature of evidence and on the evidence in social science goals slightly wider.

We've also got a question at the back there […]

[Audience question]

I'd like to ask a question about the relationship between social science and fiction. I've always thought the word anecdote is interesting, research generates anecdotes by the ton and each anecdote you know is the makings of a short novel if not a long one. And I'm just curious to know to what extent your research has generated anecdotes out of which you've been able to devise successful fiction.

[Jackie Scott]

Great, I wonder if we could take those three and get some responses and then start up bringing in more questions at that point. So over to Ann,

[Ann Oakley]

Well you know there we are, we've gone from RCTs to novels,

No okay, so let's start with, let's start with the dreadful randomised controlled trials. The important question is the fit between the question and the method, so if you are asking does intensive social work intervention stop young men getting into trouble, does running conferences on research methods stop people watching football on television, then what impresses me looking at the whole kind of universe of research that has been done across different topics, is how many times people have tried to answer that question with a method which is not suitable. So it isn't enough to interview

you know six people and conclude that social work works or it doesn't work, I mean that is obvious. Equally it's not a good idea to do an experimental study in which the people who are getting the intervention are very different from the people who are not getting the intervention. And I think there has been an enormous amount of experimental research that has been very poorly designed. Not just in health care but in education, in social policy, you know, in criminology, across the board, and that is a waste of time and effort to do, to design a study badly when you could design it better.

Of course there are instances where you can't do, you can't do a controlled trial, you have to do the best you can with the data that you've got and then you know we need sophisticated approaches of the sort that Harvey has, is responsible for introducing to planet earth, we need those kinds of approaches. I think that I would not quite agree with Harvey and he knows this because we've been discussing this for many years, that randomised trials are that difficult to do. I think that there is a huge resistance to doing them. And I personally have been involved in four or five quite big trials, day care, sex education, social support. And they were not, they were not difficult to do, they were difficult to get funding for, and perhaps they were slightly more difficult than they might have been because we were trying, and this goes back to something that Peter raised, we were trying to include qualitative data, so what we were trying to do as my colleagues in the EPPI centre are still trying to do, is to include qualitative research evidence as well as the evidence of controlled trials because that way you are hopefully taking a really broad approach to answering particular questions.

So one of the questions, the question about fiction was does research provide the stuff for fiction. There was a character in one of my novels called Overheads, there, probably nobody in the room has read it, but I have to say that some of the, I promised my colleagues at the Institute of Education that I would never write a novel about them but things got so bad that I had to. And I started a box file which was labelled fictional overheads, and in it I put all the most ridiculous examples.

[.......]

Yes, you know it's about the appropriation of a contract researcher's labour by higher education institutions who you know take the money and are not interested in the researchers. So the theme came directly out of academia and I suspect that you wouldn't, you would have a more sophisticated theme

now, but I'm quite sure that plenty of awful novels could be written about it the awful things happening, in higher education now,

[Jackie Scott]

We had another question towards the back, which I cut off before, so thank you,

[Audience question]

I think I've forgotten most of it now, sorry, but I know what was going through my mind. I think first of all I'd like to say that I actually feel in awe by being in the presence of Ann Oakley, and I've really been looking forward to this talk. And I've actually just seen that you've actually been working in social research for longer than how old I am, so that's quite an achievement. But I suppose it's about you've had this trajectory in forty five years and I am wondering I've got you here, I've got Ann Oakley here and I want to find out more about you, Ann Oakley, I want to find out about what you think you can offer young women of today. I don't mean to put that kind of pressure because it does sound like pressure, but I suppose you were seen as the voice for invisible women as they were at that time, even if you didn't mean to be in that way. And I think now we've come to a stage now where maybe some of the issues that you were speaking about don't seem to be as important for women, for example I don't know if you've read, I'm from London and there was an article in the Evening Standard about what young women, what kind of professions they wanted to do, what did they do, and over 50% of them believe it or not wanted to be WAGs [wives and girlfriends of footballers] or be famous for being famous, which is so sad, and I just wondered if you felt now that maybe if you were to talk to women of a different generation you might have to use different research methods because I don't know what's happened to young women, I mean WAGs! So if you can answer that sorry?

[Ann Oakley]

That's not a question about methods is it, it's a question about the fact that the kind of things that young women today are interested in are different from the things that they were interested in in the seventies?

[Audience]

Yes but you might also have to approach it in a different type of way for example, that's what I'm saying,

[Ann Oakley]

Yes quite possibly, I mean I, one of the projects that I am still involved with is a repeat study of the becoming a mother study that I did in the seventies. We are using the same kinds of methods and questions with a new sample of women having their first babies and it is absolutely apparent that a lot of the questions that I asked in the 1970's do not make sense now, they just don't make sense. And so an awful lot has changed. But on the other hand, you know, in that particular project there are very clear continuities and when I've been reading the transcripts from the seventies and reading transcripts from last week, and you know a lot of the themes are still there. And you know, globally the issues confronting women and with which feminist researchers ought to be concerned are really not very different now from what they were in the seventies, you know, poverty and violence and all those kinds of things haven't gone away. They have gone away to some extent in some countries, but the issues about women as an oppressed group have not gone away.

But I think there is a very different culture of talking about them now or not talking about them perhaps.

[Graham Crow]

Could I come in there, it was the first part of your question about wanting to know a bit more about Ann Oakley the person, and I've kind of got that as kind of a question here, but in a slightly different way which is that actually we do know quite a lot about Ann Oakley the person because you do tell us a great deal about yourself when you write about you know, kind of, the experience of illness and I think I'm right, I hope I've read this correctly that you write about you know your family life when you were younger with your parents and, am I right in saying you've got a description of your father being on the phone to his mother, your grandmother and reading the paper at the same time? So, actually you know my question was going to be, you do put a lot of yourself out there in a way that other writers are much more you know rigid about the distinction between material about themselves and sort of other aspects of social science. So could I ask that question in a slightly different way about how you handle that issue of what you put into the public

domain about yourself that other people might regard as sort of not really things that they'd want to share with other people?

[Ann Oakley]

Well I think I probably wouldn't make the same decisions now as I did then. Is one answer. Another answer is that I have had so many letters from people not only women but mostly women when I, after I published 'Taking it like a Women' and 'Man and Wife', and various other things saying what you are talking about there is not your life but mine. I think what I have tried to focus on is the commonalities, I am just an ordinary person, I mean my experiences of course are untypical because I am more privileged than many and so on and so forth, but a lot of the experiences of my life like illness and childbirth and relationships with men and children and so on are just the stuff of ordinary life and it's because I know, perhaps I know that from research, that I know that these are common themes, that those are the things that I'm prepared to open up. I don't tell everything, it's quite boring to tell somebody everything about yourself; it's a good way to send them to sleep, and it's possible to write a lot about oneself and not tell the truth, which I am learning because I am now writing a biography of someone who did just that. But you know you think that writing about your personal experiences is disclosure and it is, it is and it isn't. The other thing that I would say is that, I mean, this does go back to feminism, the personal is political, there is, there are reasons for writing about personal experience, all of our knowledge comes from personal experience whether we are writing about multi-level modelling. It comes from personal experience, yes, it all comes from, there are personal reasons why we do what we do, and why we do it the way we do it. And some, in academia in particular it became fashionable a while ago to pretend that one didn't have personal reasons for doing things, it was always for the public good or you know it was something that was intrinsically interesting, and so people didn't reveal why it was that they followed particular lines of enquiry or wrote particular books. And I have been perhaps more open than other people of my generation about that. But I think, I don't, I think I've done that self-consciously.

[Jackie Scott]

And a question over here,

[Audience question]

Yes, thank you ever so much it's been really sort of memorable to hear you talking about really important research principles such as listening to people and taking a human perspective on, to understand people's experience, women's experience, but one thing you only mentioned and I am wondering could you elaborate is on listening to fathers and why you did it. What was the sort of context, the policy context, the academic, intellectual context of your work and there has been really significant revival of interest in fathers both in the media, to try and retrieve the father, the father figure and present sort of representations of fathers in a very positive light recently on the TV. But I am wondering if your work connected perhaps with the work of Nancy Chodorow in the 1970's who was talking about the importance of breaking the cycle of the reproduction of mothering, saw a really important role for fathers, involving fathers in the home, it might sound rather dated but it's sort of coming back again and I'm interested in what your take is on fatherhood research really?

[Ann Oakley]

I don't know if I'm – sorry did you want to get another?

No, I don't know that I am up to date with current fatherhood research; the particular project on which I interviewed fathers was a project on young people, heath and family life in which we had, there was a book, I'm not the first author, Julia Brannen is the first author. And we were interviewing teenagers and their mothers and fathers. Julia interviewed the mothers and I interviewed the fathers and somebody else interviewed the young people. And we didn't, we didn't share information while we were doing, [while] the process of interviewing was going on, so that I didn't know what the mother in the household had told Julia when I interviewed the father, and what I remember of that project was how often the fathers just didn't tell me the things, the important things that were going on in the household. Or the mothers told Julia things, I mean who made, you know, where is the truth, where is the truth? But, and I can remember one family in which the mother had just been hospitalised by breast cancer and I interviewed the father for two hours and he didn't mention this, he didn't mention it. So, I mean that's about, that's about how men talk about emotions, partly I think it's about that. And, you know, it's also about, this particular project was about the division of labour between the mothers and the fathers in childcare and I think that, I think the way that, I'm not saying there has been a revolution in

childcare in terms of men taking part in it, but I think there has been a big change in culture and values and ideology about that.

[Audience question]

Ann, over dinner tonight you were telling me just a little bit about the current work you are doing reconstructing the life of Barbara Wootton and it was absolutely fascinating I'd love to hear more about it. And I wondered if you could tell us about the methods that you've used in constructing a biography, and what you do about the way that you construct a life in that way, and also about the archival work that you do and I wondered if you could say something about the value of working with archival data and how you've gone about that?

[Ann Oakley]

Well this is definitely a project that I wouldn't have started if I'd known where it would take me. I suppose often one starts out on something thinking well it's relatively simple, there was this person and she was born and she lived and she worked and she died and I just tell the story of her life. But of course it's actually a tremendously difficult thing to do and I looked in the research methods literature for guidance, as one does, about how to do biography and I found very little. There is very little discussion about you know, not just about the technical side of it but about the, how you make an interpretation of somebody's life, there is almost no discussion about ethical issues, you are writing the story of somebody's life and that person is dead and they can't give their consent. Is it ethical? Is it ethical to write a story of someone's life when you know that there are certain parts of their life that they have actually withheld from the public? Is it ethical to reveal those?

So the writing of a biography involves everything, I mean it involves interviews with people who are still alive, it involves going through papers, it involves going through a lot of archives, it involves being a detective, it's much more like being a detective than anything else. It's who is this person that she mentions? Where did she meet him? How am I going to find that out? You know, it's not going to be on Google, I've got to think sort of creatively about where I might be able to find that person, and you can spend weeks and weeks tracking down that person and find nothing, or alternatively you can go to somebody else's archives and find an absolute treasure trove of letters that Barbara Wootton wrote to this person.

I ought to say that you know one of the difficulties for someone writing a biography of her is that she had a bonfire before she died, so what is in her archives, which are in Cambridge, is a very partial record of large areas of her life. And that has made me think very hard about what we should keep and what we should throw away and I don't think there are any easy answers to this, but constructing the story of a life when there are big gaps is more difficult than if somebody, you know, some of the archives I've worked in, the person whose archives they are has actually deliberately set out to put a particular story there, so they have got rid of some things but they have got a story that they want to tell about their life that they want a biographer to come along and tell. So that's another issue, do you tell the story that the person wanted you to tell or do you tell something, do you tell a different story?

And in the end you have to make a judgement about the evidence and actually I think that's what you have to do whatever kind of research you are doing. Whether you've conducted a multi-centre randomised trial or whether you've interviewed five people for five years you have to make a judgement about the evidence that you've got in terms of telling a story which approximates to something. We don't talk about truth and reality any more these days but actually we are all interested in that so you have to make a decision and it's the same with a biography.

I don't know whether that answered your question, I could tell you more about Barbara Wootton but I won't, you will have to read the book, well if you want to,

[Jackie Scott]

Now you were telling us a very comforting story about finding a publisher for this book,

[Ann Oakley]

A comforting story?

[Jackie Scott]

Well, comforting for us

[Ann Oakley]

What that it was difficult?

I'm going to, in the preface to this book I'm going to name all the publishers who rejected this book. There are eighteen of them. But I'm very pleased to say that Bloomsbury are going to do it and you will be able to read it free on the internet.

[Jackie Scott]

I wonder if I could, I was reading your review of Carol Smart's book, and you talked with despair about the quantitative, qualitative sort of paradigm of opposition coming up again. And saying we've got – there are new questions to be asked to take us beyond this. But you've been around in social science for long enough to know that there is this cycle and cycle and cycle. I'm just wondering what your reflection is on the way forward then is?

[Ann Oakley]

Well you know, as I indicated in the review and I'm sure I've said lots of times in print, I'm very unhappy about the whole distinction between quantitative and qualitative, because I think we set up these paradigms and then spend long periods of time and lots of careers talking about them and defending them and all of that. And that's not the point. Well to me that's not the point. But then you know I have got a particular view on the point of it all which is about trying to produce socially-useful knowledge and research evidence, data, information or whatever you call it will actually be, is actually capable of improving people's lives. Now whether that's then going to get somebody asking about the research-policy relationship that's another whole can of worms, but I don't think that arguing about quantitative and qualitative methods and epistemology is actually helpful to that. And you know when you, ultimately when you look at it all qualitative research is quantitative and all quantitative research is qualitative. So why do we buy into this oppositional currency?

And I don't think that debate has changed very much. And I don't know how to change it.

[Jackie Scott]

Do, do Peter and then we will go,

[Peter Davis]

Just going back to one of the questions that I put before about a paper you published in 2005 in *Evidence and Policy*: you were reviewing a number of intervention studies in education and you said a good number of them had not adequately described the methods or the sample. Do you think we need some kind of professional endorsement of the appropriate way of presenting research design details? Are people being a bit too casual? What's your feeling about where we are here and we should be going? A similar question to Jackie's.

[Ann Oakley]

Well I've got two colleagues sitting in the front row over there who can help to answer that question. I don't know whether we, they, have looked over time at whether this issue of reporting has improved. It ought to be improving and I know that there were moves to for instance try and get journal editors to not publish articles that didn't say who was in the sample, what the aims of the study were, and all of that kind of thing because reporting in health care journals has improved as a result of it being impossible to get stuff published unless you actually answer these questions, and give information about who was in the study and what the aims of the whole thing were. But when we did a comparison with some of the studies which have been included in systematic reviews and compared education and health care, the reporting of educational studies was much poorer than health care. I don't know whether David or James you want to say anything?

[David Gough]

Well I don't think it's really changed very much you know particularly in the abstracts [.....] It's extraordinary how little information there was in the studies.

[James Thomas]

Looking at educational studies where a lot of people were saying how important context was and how important rich descriptions were, to then not actually be able to decide where and when the research was carried and who it was carried out with,

[Ann Oakley]

Yes,

But one doesn't, it's not a route to popularity you know, to say these things,

Particularly not in the Institute of Education,

[Ros Edwards]

You'd said that the relationship between research and policy is a can of worms, do you not want to go there or do you, could you elaborate a little bit on how you do view that relationship? Or how it is viewed elsewhere.

[Ann Oakley]

No I think it is an enormous subject and it is a subject on which there is now quite a literature, because it isn't simply the case that people do good research put it in the public domain, the policy makers come along rub their hands in glee, change their policies according to the research.

But you know, it's a political question and I won't, I can't answer the question but I will give you an illustration from the life of Barbara Wootton. It's one of the, a couple of areas of policy that she was involved in, one of them was alternatives to prison and one of them was drugs, cannabis and she chaired two commissions within two years of each other, one looking at prison and this was in the late 1960s when the prisons were very full and the policy makers wanted to find an alternative that would mean that they didn't have to build any new prisons. And she invented the idea of community service orders, which is a way of imposing a sentence on somebody but not sending them to prison. And the report was published and within a year community service orders were part of criminal policy, you know, the law was passed and then after that the court sentenced people who'd committed not very serious crimes to do community service instead of sending them to prison.

So then two years later she chairs another committee on cannabis and they review all of the evidence, all the medical evidence, and the upshot of their review of the evidence was, this is 1970 so things have changed since then, and what the committee said was cannabis is probably not more dangerous than alcohol, and we recommend lightening the fine for possession of cannabis although not for the sale of cannabis. And the Home Secretary put the report in a drawer and nothing was ever done. So there you have two committees that looked at the evidence, that came to conclusions and in one case it became policy immediately and in the other case it didn't. Now the explanation is clearly not in the process whereby the data and the evidence

was sifted and conclusions reached because they were pretty identical, the difference was the political context.

[Jackie Scott]

We had another question,

[Audience question]

I was wondering whether you could give a review on your assessment on the social usefulness of the research that you've done in terms of all of your work, which do you think has been the most useful?

[Ann Oakley]

Which do I think has been the most useful or been the most used?

Both.

I think that work that has probably been the most used is the stuff I did on maternity care, not just the becoming a mother project but I did a lot of work around, a bit later with the WHO looking at guidelines for appropriate antenatal, intra-natal and post-natal care and doing a project on midwifery, an international project with a midwife on midwifery and I think that, I think that that work fed into a movement that was already happening or was beginning to happen about the same time where there were organisations like the National Childbirth Trust and the Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services [AIMS], and obstetricians were realising that they could no longer just tell women what they wanted to do to them. And I think that that research was used, I know it was used, to change policy in a way that I would have approved of.

I think it's probably not, I'm not the right person to answer the question in the sense that I might not know some of the areas in which the work that I've done has been used or useful. I know that some of the work that we've done in the social science research unit particularly in the area of health promotion has been taken up and directly used in policy for example one of the early systematic reviews we did was of sex education, and we looked at peer-delivered sex education which was, this was some years ago, was becoming fashionable and the Department of Health was about to roll out a programme of peer-delivered sex education and our research showed that this would not be the right thing to do and the policy was changed as a consequence. So you

know, there are particular instances in which you can say this did happen or this didn't happen, but you know the world is a big place and all sorts of other things could have happened or not.

[Graham Crow]

One way in which your work is useful if I can come back to the teaching environment is that you kind of put things, make things available for people in classroom situations to, 'shock' is probably not too strong a word to say, so you've got the piece in your housework study where you talk about the woman who washed her curtains every week, and you know some of my students are shocked that curtains ever get washed, let alone once a week. And I suppose, so that is serving a useful function I think, also posing things in terms of a question so, you know, the question 'who cleans the toilet?', again some people are shocked, toilets have to be cleaned? That's quite a revelation to some people, and I suppose there is that sense of usefulness, it's not directly a policy usefulness but it does you know it contributes to changing the world in some way. So do you, I mean I am wondering do you get feedback from people about, you know, the bit I liked most about your housework study is the bit about the woman who was cleaning her curtains once a week because it just made me think and it made me think about my own housework patterns or it was really useful for promoting a discussion in my family about things like that. So, do you get much, kind of, feedback from people who have read your work in that kind of way about how you've made people think differently?

[Ann Oakley]

Yes I do.

I have had quite a lot over the years and it's always very heartwarming if people take the trouble to actually you know these days it's usually by email, send you a communication about what it is that they have found helpful about what you've done and I suppose something also that I should have said earlier, you know it's not been my goal to change the world, well I suppose it was when I was young you know I thought I could change the world, we all do. But it quickly became evident to me that it was probably enough to change the minds of a few people, not even enormous quantities of people, but if what you did and the way you made it, the way you wrote about it, helped people to think imaginatively and creatively and in new ways about

their experiences, and to talk about them with other people, then that was enough.

The ultimate aim is not only always to change government policy but it is actually to help people to change government policy. To help people to think about their lives and what is happening to them, and I think that was very much the case with the housework study particularly, that what the housework books I think enabled women in particular to do was to see what they were doing was work. And actually you know it might seem obvious and it might seem obvious to us now but it was not obvious then and it was not obvious to a lot of women why they felt so tired for example, because they were doing so much work, what they were doing was work just as if they'd been in a factory or whatever. So it's a different way of seeing and a different way of thinking …is a good product.

[Graham Crow]

I don't know if now is the right time to have the next slide because I'm thinking that, we are going to put up a slide of a poem ['General Smuts pub'] you wrote and that's kind of one of the things that for me has a point of connection because I can think of situations where I could kind of feel similar to what you are describing here as a, I mean I don't know whether you want to talk about the poem and what it's getting at but I suppose I you know I just love that bit about just feeling that you are on another planet that you are just completely out of place, and I guess I mean I don't know if I've ever had that feeling going into a pub with football fans but I've certainly, I can connect to that in terms of feeling myself just like, I don't belong here, and now the football has calmed down outside but we thought it was appropriate to put it up as it's a sort of,

[Ann Oakley]

I think Graham may be the only person who has read my poetry, this poem, I published a book which was a mixture of essays, academic essays and poetry the first edition was, and the second edition the publishers took all the poetry out. You know this is about, you have to be doing fiction or fact you can't mix things up, this poem was written when I was driving home from work and the car broke down in White City and I was stranded in the pub and there was a football match going on and that's why he wanted to show it, and those of

course were before the days that I discovered cycling so they were quite a long time ago, I'm not going to read it.

[Graham Crow]

There is a bit here 'as foreign to me as outer space' just a sense of being in a totally alien environment.

[Ann Oakley]

Yes, the original title of 'Gender on Planet Earth' was 'Aliens and Outsiders', which I liked but the publishers didn't. But, I don't know whether women have this experience more than men, but I certainly had it quite a lot in my life. It's a feeling that I just don't belong, I don't know what the world is doing, and it was particularly the case when I was forced to drink gin and tonic in the pub in White City. I didn't understand what was going on around me. But then you know, I have a particular view about football which I won't expose you to or anybody else here to.

[Jackie Scott]

We've got time for a few more questions,

[Audience question]

[……..] I was just wondering what the logic is, I mean perhaps you just wanted to write poetry but did you feel that writing a poem was the effective way of revealing what had been revealed to you in that particular moment?

[Ann Oakley]

I don't think that many people actually go through a process of logical thinking about what they do. So I didn't make a decision about writing a poem, I've always written poetry, all my life and I've, most of it is not published. I like the discipline, this is about writing styles, the discipline of poetry is that you have to only use a very few words. And I enjoy that discipline in terms of trying to – writing a poem is a good way of trying to find what it is that's going on, what it is that you feel, because you have to think very hard about the – finding the right words to describe it. I could have written a short story, I've done that too, I could have written a book, I could have written an academic book based on qualitative interviews with people

who are in pubs when football going on maybe someone is out there doing that now.

[Jackie Scott]

Can we go back to, fine we will pick up several questions, and this is a very short one so that we get this in, actually I should give a plug as well I mean before this session Graham gave me the DVD which was made of Ann Oakley's 'Housewife' which is, it's actually, it's a really interesting interview which covers quite a breadth, but there was one bit that almost shocked me,

[Ann Oakley]

I haven't seen it by the way,

[Jackie Scott]

Ah, well this was asking about how, it was asking about the nature of evidence again when you are just interviewing somebody and you used the words 'well of course your respondents can lie', and I suppose in survey research, I mean we you know young people's surveys the British Household Panel Study for example you always have to take the outliers out for kids who boast about their smoking I mean they are just absurd numbers even if they really went at it with dedication there is not enough hours in the day for that to be believable. But somehow that's misrepresentation or misunderstanding and one of the things that I really like about your writing which isn't just the succinctness of it but it's also being terribly blunt, you call things as they are, and I wondered how deliberate that was as part of the strategy if you like to sort of draw people up short and make them pay attention.

But let's get some other questions and comments and by questions I don't mean that they always have to be questions either,

[Audience question]

Yes it seems like writing is an essential part of your life and your identity, I mean what drives you to write so much?

[Ann Oakley]

What drives me to write so much?

[Audience question]

Yes,

[Ann Oakley]

Well I've always felt myself to be a writer, above everything else and actually I did go to university, this one, and do a degree but my intention after that was to be a writer, and I did start out writing novels. This story is somewhere or other, and I got a publisher to accept the first one and then the publisher at the second one said this second one proves that you are a one novel person and I don't want it. So I had some children instead, and thought well I'd better do something else for a bit, so I got a job doing social research. And I'm still there. So my core identity is being a writer. And I think that has, with me and with other people too that has a lot to do with the fact that I had a very solitary childhood, I was an only child and my parents, my mother was quite old when she had me, I mean that's got nothing to do with it really, I remember her as not engaging with me much in terms of playing or doing things or taking me out, and so I spent a lot of time on my own, and words you know fascinated me, so I think it's just a very core thing, whatever I do in life I tend to find myself writing about it and every time I do it I say I'm never going to write anything again because it's so horrible.

So this book that I am writing now about Barbara Wootton is just driving me mad and I'm never ever going to write a book again, and you are all here to make sure that I don't. [Ann has subsequently written several more books.]

So I don't have to drive myself to do it. I think, yes, no, I mean and it doesn't just happen, you know, it's a discipline, it's a discipline and it's a discipline that I've become very used to, and I don't know whether it makes sense.

It makes sense to other people who consider themselves to be writers, it's just something that you have to do. It's part of being alive.

[Audience question]

Do you have any other addictions?

[Ann Oakley]

What a question! addictions, well I am quite addicted to my grandchildren, I don't mind the odd glass of wine, that's what he's really getting at,

[Jackie Scott]

It sounded like a question based on knowledge I'm going to have to.....

[Ann Oakley]

Oh Eastenders, Eastenders, the only reason I'm here tonight is because Eastenders is not on television today because of the football.

[Jackie Scott]

We have another question over there,

[Audience question]

I noticed that a common thread that comes up quite a lot in your writing ....and I wondered what your thoughts about this phenomenon are?

[Ann Oakley]

I didn't hear the question. Could you repeat the question?

[Audience question]

I am really interested in the concept of vulnerability and I know that that's a theme that has come up in quite a few of the works that you have done, and I just really wondered what your perspective of what this phenomenon is,

[Ann Oakley]

I don't know but you are right, and when I was talking about the book 'Women Confined' the notion of vulnerability and vulnerability factors, things that make people vulnerable to bad outcomes when something like childbirth happens to them, actually you know I think that one of the places that one of the pieces of research that impressed me a lot was a book called 'Social Origins of Depression' it was written by George Brown and Tirril Harris, in 1968, something like that [in fact 1978].

And that was very much about the factors that make people vulnerable in particular situations to becoming depressed, and the opposite side of that is the factors that stop people from being vulnerable, that are protective, and I, I mean certainly in terms of that research and probably others as well, I found it very useful, I found it a way of thinking about something that made a lot of sense in terms of the data. But I don't know, you, if you've asked the question you will know a lot more about current literature on that than I do. It's not

something that I've looked at recently. Would you like to say something about that?

[Audience]

It's the focus for my PhD, because so much has been written from the health care context but it's very much from a practitioner held perspective, and there is very little written from an individual account of, and that's perhaps what I'm looking at, it's the lived experience, that part of the picture that is missing,

[Ann Oakley]

In the book that I did called 'Fracture' which begins with a broken arm, there is, I've, I don't know whether you've seen that but I draw quite a lot on the sociology of health and illness literature about what it's like to you know to live in a body that has got something wrong with it, and what that does in terms of one's sense of identity, and so on, so I think there is literature on people with various kinds of illness conditions that is quite useful, in terms of that.

[Graham Crow]

I'm trying to think about where it is but somewhere you've got an account about walking down a path and there being a beetle on its back that is kind of vulnerable perhaps, I'm not sure where, but somewhere you've got that and I think you talk about, do I then sort of turn it over and allow it to go on or do I leave it to you know its vulnerability, and I think you do turn it over,

[Ann Oakley]

Well I've been having that conversation with one of my granddaughters recently because my kitchen is infested with moths and I have been killing them. And Tabitha aged ten says you cannot kill moths. That is just not on. So we are having an argument about you can or can't kill moths, but there are so many of them in the kitchen that they have to go I'm afraid,

I don't remember the beetle story, [it is in Taking it Like a Woman]

[Graham Crow]

.........your work is about people but it's also about nature and sort of moves backwards and forwards and I suppose that's an interesting thread running throughout it all.

[Ann Oakley]

Well I think it all, it's there in Gender on Planet Earth too, very much the vulnerability of the planet and the things that human beings decide to do with it. And you know the point of that book is to try and make connections between the sex gender system and the exploitation of the planet because I think there are connections between them that people often don't want to see. And you know the policy relevance is not obvious, what you do about them, but I think that doesn't mean that we shouldn't try and develop that kind of understanding.

[Jackie Scott]

So the question over here please,

[Audience question]

It's maybe a bit broad but it's just about, sometimes I've been to conferences and it gets to a certain point and then someone remembers that they haven't brought up the G word, and sort of people perhaps roll their eyes and say oh yes we need to think about the women's perspective and we need to think about gender, and the sort of interaction between so called mainstream research and when you try and kind of shine a light on an area and you know that it is still part of the mainstream but it's perhaps seen as being separate, and sort of advice or thoughts about the bringing the two together. And also moths hate lavender so you could try lavender,

[Ann Oakley]

Actually I'm trying peppermint oil, and bay leaves,

But lavender is a nicer smell,

Yes, gender, a dirty word, I mean I don't know how things have really changed, I remember being at a conference in 1974 in Aberdeen which was called Sexual Divisions in Society, because believe it or not some of you are too young to realise this but the word gender was not in common usage in the seventies. So you talked about sexual divisions, you would talk about

gender now. But that was the first British Sociological Association conference in which people came and talked about the fact that the division between cultural, you know masculinity and femininity was an important aspect of our social structure. And it was quite mind-blowing. And then we went through a period in which you know everything became gender, and then we entered a period in which nobody wanted to hear about it at all. And I assume that is where we still are? But I don't go to conferences, with this notable exception I don't go to conferences anymore so I don't really know whether you know mainstream healthcare, mainstream social policy, sociology conferences it would still be the case that somebody who was giving a paper with gender in the title would get a smaller audience of mainly women?

I don't know, you tell me!

But if that is happening you just have to, you know that cartoon, that famous feminist cartoon of the seventies and there is a woman with her hair standing on end saying 'never give up', you just have to go on, and not be put off.

[Jackie Scott]

I think probably that is a brilliant ending for this conversation tonight and we've actually gone from you referring in terms of your answer to the vulnerability about your, the well not the current book but the last of your non-fiction books before that, right back to the first book that came out and I think we've had an incredible conversation with you tonight so thank you so much, thank you to the other panellists and thank you, most of all to you, for coming.