Introduction

This book has three aims. One is to provide an account of a research project concerning the health and wellbeing of women and their babies that began in 1983 and continues today. The second aim is to contextualize this account within ‘a sociology of the research process’ (Platt 1976) that centres on the telling of a story about how and why the research came into being, and what happened when it did. Both the descriptive and the analytic aims of the book are grounded in its third major focus, which is an epistemological one, concerning the status and gendering of knowledge in the contemporary capitalist world.

The story unfolded in the book, and the details of the narrative it encloses, link a wide variety of different concerns about knowledge, policy and practice in the contemporary industrialized world. Some of the major issues addressed in the book are:

1. What ‘is’ health? How far do variations in the social environment, including people’s social relationships and networks, ‘explain’ differences in health status between individuals and groups?
2. What are the possibilities and limits of professionalized medical care as a strategy for promoting health?
3. When women have children, what is the role of professionalized health care on the one hand, and of the social environment on the other, in helping them to do so?
4. To what extent do professional definitions of the ‘normal’ distort people’s experiences of their bodies and their social identities, and what has the concept of ‘risk’ to do with this?
5. What is the epistemological basis of the methods used by social scientists to advance knowledge? What ‘is’ knowledge, anyway?
6. Why are methods of contributing to advances in knowledge commonly divided into quantitative and qualitative? How does this division work in practice?
7. What is the relationship between social science research, academic knowledge and public policy?
‘The real problem’

When I say this book will address these issues, I do not mean it will provide any easy answers. Like Martin Hammersley (1989: 6) in his account of the origins and dilemmas of the qualitative method in social science, I warn the reader now that there is no point in turning to the end of this book to find solutions to the problems posed – the reader will be disappointed. The issues themselves are enormous in scale and relevance, and it would be arrogant to suppose that my own perspective on one research project (this book) could untangle some of the most difficult questions of our time. What I am doing, rather more modestly, is following Wright Mills’s (1959) injunction to deploy a sociological imagination in connecting private troubles to public issues, and, in perceiving their common ground, to identify some of the crises of ideology and practice confronting contemporary culture. From this point of view, then, the book’s aim is to expose complex problems rather than provide simple solutions. It is not that there are no solutions, but that the nature of the problems exposes the falsity of the premises on which the questions are based. You cannot have a solution which works if the problem it addresses is not the ‘real’ problem. Or, to put it differently, ‘reality’ may be considered to be the problem.

To anticipate the argument set out later in the book: the knowledge systems of western postcapitalist societies have reached a crisis in their model of how the world is to be known and who is to know it. It is this crisis that joins others – the growing debate about the relevance of medicine to health, the crippling dependence of modern societies on the power of the legal profession to arbitrate behaviour, the waning light of sociology/social science itself in contemporary political discourse and institutions of academia, the redefinition of the university as a profit-making enterprise, the continuing insurgence of feminism in drawing attention to gender inequality – all these features of life are connected through a confusion about what knowledge ‘is’ and how it is to be attained. In naming this a ‘confusion’ rather than a ‘conspiracy’, I wish to distance myself as a feminist social scientist from those who say that either capitalism or patriarchy is to ‘blame’ for the present situation. Social systems that appropriate the labours of some to give others spurious power are not likely to be those in which the ownership and nature of knowledge are openly and freely debated, except in the sense identified by Walkerdine and Lucey (1989: 29) that ‘successful’ socialization involves transmission of the illusion of autonomy – the child must believe itself to be free. But this does not mean that those who point out the fallacies of capitalism and the phallacies of patriarchy
successfully circumvent the problem by identifying one or other institutional structure as responsible for this.

The particular confusion within the general one which occupies a good deal of the argument of this book hinges on the relation between subjectivity and objectivity. According to western philosophical tradition, what exists in a person’s mind - is subjective - is separable from what exists in reality - is objective. But ‘subject’ also means one who is not independent, who is under the authority of others; and ‘reality’ also means ‘of or pertaining to the king ... that which pertains to the one in power’ (Frye 1989: 79). The student, Black and women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s articulated the subjectivity/objectivity relation as political - institutional power structures were shown to be closely associated with the ideologies and content of knowledge. To the challenge of claiming the ‘personal is political’, academic discourse responded in a variety of ways. Sociologists learnt to get their tongues around ‘symbolic interactionism’ and ‘ethnomethodology’, and to place positivism and functionalism firmly in the past. But now the political revolutions of the sixties are themselves in the past, we stand amidst the fragments of two languages wondering where to go next. The ‘new’ language of postmodernism (combined at times with the ambiguous, if not frankly derogatory, ‘postfeminism’) provides an apparently fresh technical categorizer, but its texts tend to obscurantism, and it is, in any case, the domination of the ‘isms’ we need to escape.

“The turning-point’?

Physicist Fritjof Capra calls this ‘the turning-point’: the moment of potential cultural movement caught between two alternative paradigms of knowledge. While one asserts the supremacy of the mind-body divide - the model of a rational, analytic science based on a mechanical view of the natural world - the other suggests a more subversive philosophy - the language of political revolt, which speaks of values masquerading as facts, and of people’s entrapment and consequent alienation in political and economic systems they did not create. Table A lists two paired columns of words which signify the paradigm clash to which Capra refers. To his own list of terms, I have added others which represent the themes around which the argument of this book is organized. Table A thus stands as an important thematic conceptual divide to which the text will refer many times. It is headed ‘The habit of thinking in dichotomies’ after an essay by the US philosopher
Susan Sherwin (1989) on the shortcomings of traditional philosophical methodologies. Sherwin says:

Dichotomous thinking forces ideas, persons, roles and disciplines into rigid polarities. It reduces richness and complexity in the interest of logical neatness ... Moreover, the creation and use of dichotomies seem to be important
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elements in the very structure of patriarchy - the institution of patriarchy involves power relations that rest on the assumption of fundamental and unbridgeable differences between the sexes reflected in multiple forms of polarity. (Sherwin 1989: 32)

Either/or thinking puts an embargo on both/sometimes-the-one, sometimes-the-other, possibilities. It is endemic in many areas of life. As Sherwin says, either/or is a cultural (but not the biological – see Oakley 1972; Laqueur 1990) basis of gender differentiation. The paralleling and confirming of social gender dichotomies with the home/work, private/public divisions of an economic system is an extremely powerful force ensuring the longevity of these.

Capra’s argument, invoked by his own unease as a working physicist with the discontinuity between modern physics and the dominant view of knowledge, is that civilizations pass through cultural transformations in which certain world views and constellations of beliefs and practices disintegrate, to be replaced by others. Examples of such transformations are the rise of civilization with the invention of agriculture at the start of the Neolithic period, the development of Christianity and the transition from the Middle Ages to the Scientific Age. Western civilizations, Capra maintains, are currently facing a crisis which is marked by three transitions in particular: the decline of patriarchy, the economic transition from fossil-fuels to solar energy, and a shift in cultural values away from ‘the belief in the scientific method as the only approach to knowledge’ (Capra 1983: 31). It is only within such a context as Capra describes that the trials, tribulations and successes outlined in the rest of this book become, as a whole, comprehensible. While each can be explained in particular terms – the Social Science Research Council turned the social support project down because they ran out of money; the research midwives were unhappy with the ethics of random allocation because they had insufficient training in the scientific method; medical audiences to the research findings came up with allegations of bias because the project ‘director’ made no secret of her allegiance to the political importance of subjectivity – yet these fragmented explanations do not tell a story with a coherent beginning, a middle and an end. They assume the whole to be a sum of its parts. But every whole is more than that; every story is more than a list of characters, scenes, dialogues and happenings. The narrative strength of a story is the way these features interact to produce a set of meanings which make sense/are generalizable beyond the story itself.
Social Support and Motherhood is not a book that reports the results of research in the way in which this is conventionally understood. One paper which does this is reproduced as Figure 9.1. Others have been published, and are available to anyone who wants to pursue particular areas of data and their analysis (see Appendix II for a list). What this book tries to do is tell a story about the unfolding of a particular research project in a particular cultural context. In so doing, it attempts to abstract some general lessons about the activity of research in the real world. As Dorothy Smith (1987) argues, there is no theory about the world which does not begin in someone’s everyday experience. Even the grandest theories start as seedlings in the soil of human beings’ efforts to survive and produce their own identities and futures through a multitude of ‘trivial’ labours. The Platonic idea of knowledge which contends the necessity of transcending the everyday, the mundane, in order to arrive at things which can be universally known, has successfully blinded us to this simple experiential fact. We must go back, then, to what it is like to be researchers and to do research if we want to understand more about the limits and possibilities of knowledge in our time.