

The Value of Experience for Understanding the Mental Load

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I think that history is just the opinion of the righter [sic] ... That is why I like the Mass Observation Archive. I don't say my account of my time is the most accurate, but it is how I have lived it. Things that affect me are but they are not to others, doe[s] this mean they are not important. I realise I am preaching to the converted, I just wanted you to know that I think you[r] project is important to the future because it tells how we lived in the past. [1]

The above statement, written by Mass Observation participant D156 in Autumn, 2004, beautifully articulates one of the many reasons why the history of experiences approach is so valuable. The participant was acutely aware that concerns about 'accuracy' and representativeness should not undermine the intrinsic value of listening to people's own descriptions of how they have lived. This belief was very much in line with the aims of The Mass Observation Project (MOP) which began in 1981 as a 'unique national life writing project about everyday life in Britain, capturing the experiences, thoughts and opinions of everyday people'. Three times a year the volunteers are asked to respond to open-ended questionnaires known as 'directives' with the intention that their self-motivated participation would provide a 'window on their world'. [2] Much has been written about the shortcomings of the MOP's methodology, namely the lack of representativeness. [3] However, despite these limitations, experts on the history of emotions, mental health, and stress have demonstrated the immense value of MOP for examining people's own narration of their feelings and experiences. [4] This also is the case with the 'mental load'.

The term 'mental load' has recently been invented to describe the type of unpaid cognitive and emotional labour that constitutes an essential part of domestic life. A useful explanation of the term has been given by Liz Dean, Brendan Churchill and Leah Ruppanner. [5] They describe how it is the *combination* of both the practical/cognitive unpaid domestic tasks (such as cleaning, meal preparation, organising social activities) *and* the 'emotional labour' involved in managing the psychological wellbeing of the family that makes the 'mental load' so burdensome. [6] Recent research has shown that, despite a move towards a more equal distribution of practical domestic tasks between men and women in many western societies, the mental load is still disproportionately carried by women in opposite-sex relationships, even in situations where both partners work full-time. [7] Unlike housework chores which can be seen, measured, and completed, the mental load is invisible with no end point. Often, the only way to find evidence of the mental load is through listening to people's experiences. MOP sources offer a unique opportunity to examine how the mental load was constructed,

experienced, negotiated and narrated in the past. Moreover, focusing on people's everyday experiences of the mental load in the recent past can help us to understand the underlying socio-economic and cultural factors underpinning the persistence of this gender inequality.

Mass observation provides such exceptional source materials for understanding the mental load because the directives prompt participants to talk about all aspects of their lives, from their everyday routines to their more personal opinions and experiences. For example, the 'day diary' directives, where participants are asked to record every aspect of one particular day, function as a traditional 'time use survey' to provide evidence of the gendered division of everyday unpaid domestic and cognitive labour. However, directives that solicit more reflective answers on a wide range of topics can be used alongside these diaries to provide deeper insight into people's opinions, attitudes, emotions and experiences – something which is often lacking from previous studies which focused mainly on visible labour. When these two types of sources are combined there is an excellent opportunity to glimpse moments of the emotional labour that make up a significant part of the mental load: moments that are otherwise normally invisible. For example, in a reply to a directive about men and women in 1991 one female participant wrote the following about her domestic life with her son and husband:

Men are more singled-minded than women who carry several ideas / jobs in their head at once. My evening is much busier. There's the dinner to cook, serve and clear up after. Luke needs to be put to bed – read story, get clothes ready for tomorrow etc. then there's the washing up to do. If I'm working there's the preparation to be done for the lessons, my sandwiches to make, bag to pack and next days dinner to be arranged and Luke's after school arrangements need to be confirmed. He comes home and doesn't have these responsibilities. Granted I should pass over some of these jobs to John and Luke, but I have to do them to justify my existence... Perhaps that's another difference. Men have jobs which are very specific and measurable, women's are less specific and less quantifiable. [8]

In this short extract are many examples of the unequal distribution of everyday domestic practical and cognitive work, as well as an acute awareness of how these 'responsibilities' pile up to create a 'mental load' that is impossible to measure. The participant highlights the emotional burden of having to perform a disproportionate amount of this invisible labour to 'justify my existence'.

In an extract from another female participant, the role that 'emotional labour' plays in constituting the mental load is even more clearly visible:

For birthdays I always make a cake – very special – for the boys and an ordinary cake with candles for my husband. He never arranges something similar for me. I buy cream cakes to celebrate the boys' successes in exams... – he doesn't. Despite all this – we don't argue except occasionally and on the surface give the appearance of a normal married couple. Sometimes I do get very 'low' but on the whole we jog along. Not sure how happy/unhappy my husband is as he can't discuss anything – starts to shout and fling his arms around. [9]

Again, the unequal distribution of the practical and cognitive labour involved in arranging special treats is stressed, but there is also evidence of the lack of emotional labour provided by the husband who, by neglecting to buy his wife and sons cakes, paid little attention to their emotional wellbeing. Not only did he fail to contribute to the planning of these family celebrations, he was actively hostile towards his wife's attempts to attend to the

psychological health of the relationship by refusing to talk about his own emotions or discuss their relationship. Finally, the extract provides evidence of the emotional management the wife had to undertake to appear on the surface as a ‘normal married couple’, despite admitting that she gets ‘very low’.

Of course, these sources cannot be treated as full and impartial accounts of what happened within these families. However, as Kristine Alexander, Stephanie Olsen and Karen Vallgård have recently [demonstrated](#), the problem of authenticity and reliability when dealing with experience is not unique to any one type of source or actor.^[10] Instead, as Reetta Eiranen has [shown](#), using a narrative-studies approach to analysing ego-documents can offer an excellent method for examining the complex ways in which people constructed their experience for particular audiences and at particular times.^[11] The longitudinal nature of the MOP sources means that the replies of particular individuals can be analysed over many years to build an in-depth picture of how their experiences of the mental load changed over their life cycle. There is not space here to elaborate, but in future research it may be possible to pinpoint how changes in the ways that people narrate their experiences relate to wider societal developments. By doing so, not only is the individual and their experience of the mental load revealed, but also the relation to the wider social and cultural context in which the individual was writing. This is essential for an understanding of why the burden of the mental load remains so unequally divided between men and women.

Notes

[1] [SxMOA2/1/73/1/1/48](#): Response from D165, ‘Being part of research’, 2004, Mass Observation Project, The Keep Archives, Sussex, UK (hereafter, MOP).

[2] <http://www.massobs.org.uk/about/mass-observation-project> The original Mass Observation project had been initiated in 1937 but was, by the late 1940s, diverted into market research.

[3] Annebella Pollen, ‘Research Methodology in Mass Observation Past and Present: ‘Scientifically, about as valuable as a chimpanzee’s tea party at the zoo?’’, *History Workshop Journal*, 75 (2013): 213–235.

[4] Andrew Burchell and Mathew Thomson, ‘Composing Well-Being: Mental Health and the Mass Observation Project in Twentieth-Century Britain’, *Social History of Medicine*, 35 (2022): 444–72; Claire Langhamer, ‘Feelings, Women and Work in the Long 1950s’, *Women’s History Review*, 26 (2017): 77–92; Jill Kirby, *Feeling the Strain: A Cultural History of Stress in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

[5] Liz Dean, Brendan Churchill and Leah Ruppner, ‘The mental load: building a deeper theoretical understanding of how cognitive and emotional labor overload women and mothers’, *Community, Work & Family*, 25 (2022): 13–29.

[6] This definition builds on the concept of ‘emotional labour’ first used by Arlie Russell Hochschild to describe the acts of managing one’s feelings and those of other people’s based on the emotional requirements of a particular job. See, Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). The term originally referred to paid employment but can also be applied to the

management of emotions within the domestic sphere. Arlie Hochschild's concept of the 'Second Shift' has also been important for understanding the gendered distribution of unpaid cognitive labour that occurs in families where both partners engage in full time paid employment. See; Arlie Russell Hochschild and Anne Machung, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989).

[7] Andreas Haupt and Dafna Gelbgiser, 'The Gendered Division of Cognitive Household Labor, Mental Load, and Family-work Conflict in European Countries'. *SocArXiv*, 5 August, 2022.

[8] [SxMOA2/1/35/1/1/94](#): MOP, participant D1673, 'Women and Men', 1991.

[9] [SxMOA2/1/36/2/1/129](#): MOP, participant F1849, 'Pace of Life', 1992.

[10] Kristine Alexander, Stephanie Olsen and Karen Vallgård, 'Voices and Sources: Lessons from the History of Childhood', *Digital Handbook of the History of Experience*, 2023.

[11] Reetta Eiranen, 'The Narrative Construction of Experience', *Digital Handbook of the History of Experience*, 2023.