Preconstructing Suspicion and Recasting Masculinity in Preschool Settings

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Abstract

Although there is literature explaining how female ethnographers negotiate male-dominated research settings, there is a lack of literature explaining how male ethnographers negotiate female-dominated settings. It is, more or less, taken for granted the research settings males choose will be suitable for them. The field of early childhood education, and preschools in particular, would benefit from a basic explanation of male fieldworker practices and why they are necessary for men in early childhood education settings. Drawing on personal experiences from two years of ethnographic research, I turn to a Montessori preschool in the Midwestern United States to address the complexities of being a male fieldworker in a female-dominated setting. I first explicate some dimensions of preconstructing suspicion of males in ECE. I then develop a gender recasting strategy with the goal of recasting masculinity. Recasting masculinity is a reflexive self-presentation strategy using personal characteristics as resources to build trust and rapport with research participants.

Keywords: masculinity, suspicion, fieldwork, preschool, Montessori

Many classic ethnographic studies take place in male-dominated settings. Ethnographies by William Foote Whyte (1943), Elijah Anderson (1999), Mitchell Duneier (1999), and Sudhir Venkatesh (2008) are exemplary works drawing on lives in urban settings. Over the years ethnographic research has grown to include more diverse settings including nursing homes (Gubrium, 1997) and suburbs (Baumgartner, 1988). Education settings, too, are important sites for ethnographic fieldwork (Demerath, 2009; Lareau & Muñoz, 2012; Pascoe, 2007). However, when we think about education and ethnography, preschools are not the first setting to come to mind. More often we consider high schools (Pascoe, 2007) or colleges (Stuber, 2011), further contributing to the underrepresentation of preschools (Delamont, 2002).

Early childhood education (ECE) settings such as preschools are broadly considered female-dominated settings. Ninety-seven percent of preschool and elementary school teachers in the United States are female (Statistical Abstract of the United States 2012, Table 616), and it is culturally construed as women's work. Hence the presence of males in ECE is uncommon. Males are generally understood in two manners. First, men are taken as "high status tokens" working their way up to administration (Sargent, 2004). Second, and less positively, males are interpreted as threatening hegemony, such as being feminine, homosexual, and/or pedophiles (Gosse, Parr, & Allison, 2008; King 1998; Oyler, Jennings, and Lozada, 2001; Skelton 2003). Whether complimentary or pejorative, male preschool teachers and researchers are under considerable scrutiny in ECE settings (Johnson, 2000; Jones, 2001; King, 2009). In a real sense, males are preconstructed as suspicious. Preconstructed suspicion is a collective representation of threat, in this case embodied by men working and/or doing research in preschools.

I turn to Ellis Montessori Preschool in the Midwestern United States to explore male researcher strategies resisting preconstructed suspicion. This article adds to the practical discussion of gender practices during fieldwork by proposing strategies for "recasting masculinity" in female-dominated settings, such as preschools. Recasting masculinity is a reflexive self-presentation strategy using personal characteristics as resources to build trust and rapport with research participants. It encourages researchers to consider the setting and participants prior to fieldwork, anticipate situations, and also analyze field reality in the moment and adjust accordingly.

In the following sections, I will describe my research setting and give an account of the methods I used for data collection. Following that, I will provide a theoretical view of ethnographic reflexivity and gender informing this article. I will then analyze instances relating to preconstructing suspicion as evidence for the usefulness of recasting masculinity. Last, I will reflect on some of the recasting strategies I used during fieldwork.

The Setting

In 1967 a group of parents founded Ellis Montessori Preschool, a pseudonym, in the Midwestern United States as an alternative to traditional preschools in the area. It serves approximately eighty-five children ages four weeks to six years. There are about thirty-five employees, including administration, teachers, and kitchen staff. The building has two floors, a full kitchen, offices, and six classrooms conceptually divided into "upper" and "lower" schools. The upper school has three "primary" classrooms with "friends" (the preschool's vernacular is gender neutral when referring to children) between the ages of three and six years. The lower school also has three classrooms: "infants" "toddlers," and "preprimary." The infants' room serves children between the ages of four weeks and one year, toddlers serves children between the ages of one and two years, and preprimary serves children from two to three years.

The teachers in the lower school do more "side work" than those in the upper school. Side work is the work such as cleaning, changing diapers, food preparation, preparing for naps, and so on, teachers do in addition to teaching. All rooms have side work. However, side work increases as the children's age decreases. Teachers in the lower school change diapers, while teachers in the upper school do not. Teachers in the infant room feed, hold, and rock the babies to sleep, whereas teachers in the upper school do not have to do as much side work related to care. Indeed, when the infant room teachers are not holding, feeding, playing, rocking, changing, or putting the babies to sleep, they are documenting evidence of caring for the babies. In fact, most infant room work relates to side work.

There are usually about twenty children in each primary classroom and three to four teachers with overlapping schedules. Primary rooms emphasize learning academic and social skills. There are differences in the side work in the upper school and lower school. Although children

sometimes have "accidents" (urinating in their pants, for example), children are expected to change clothes themselves. There is also a difference in food preparation and serving. Teachers prepare the food, but children serve themselves. For the most part, children put themselves to sleep at naptime, although teachers are there to read stories, pat backs, and provide comfort. Additionally, the two male teachers at the preschool work in the upper school.

The Montessori Environment

Maria Montessori's (1870-1952) pedagogic philosophy shapes experience for teachers and students. Enlightenment thinking influenced Montessori's work and writing (Montessori, 1967, 1972, 1974). Important principles such as individuality, liberty, freedom, responsibility, and empowerment are prominent in Montessori philosophy (Brehony, 2000, p. 117). Nancy Williams and Rebecca Keith (2000) point to the conscious cultivation of democratic principles underlying Montessori education. Kevin Brehony (2000) discusses Montessori education as the emergence of a child-centered approach. Indeed, Montessori's approach to education has been explained as "the principle of freedom in a prepared environment (Standing, 1962, p.5). Montessori's "prepared environment" was part of the child-centered education intended to produce "self-activity" (Standing, 1962). In one sense the prepared environment includes tables, chairs, shelves, and so on fitting children's bodies. It is also the practical arrangement of the classroom so the child is able to move about freely. Self-activity, then, refers to teaching oneself. Montessori's didactic materials aid self-activity and are intended to teach the child without adult interference.

"Work" takes on a different meaning at Ellis Montessori. Work is the learning materials children choose and the child's noticeable concentration. The four main learning areas at Ellis Montessori are practical life, sensorial, math, and language. The practical life area involves the basics of everyday life such as tying, buttoning, pouring liquids, and cleaning. The sensorial area features work with different colors, textures, sounds, and sizes. The math and language areas include work in which a child may trace letters and numbers, learn multiplication using beads, and so on. Together, these areas and the work within them are the cornerstones of Ellis Montessori Preschool's learning environment.

The upper school more prominently features math and language work, although variations are present in the lower school. At a philosophical level, work "constitutes the central act of Montessori practice, which entails intellectual, social, and moral/spiritual development" (Cossentino, 2006, p. 69). In a Montessori classroom work is not only the available learning materials, but also a deeper level of focus encompassed in "effortful activity focused on 'real things' that has the power to bring about 'mental concentration'" (Cossentino, 2006, p. 68).

Self-activity, then, is how a child gains autonomy. This is evident in Ellis Montessori children choosing work almost completely independent of the teacher. Many times after line time (group learning activities) a teacher would say, "You may choose work that challenges you" or "You may choose math work," but not say the actual piece of work the child had to choose. The child choosing math work quickly makes up her mind and walks over to the basket containing floor rugs, takes one, walks to an open space, places it on the floor, and then unfolds it. This area now belongs to that child and no one else. It is her responsibility. She then walks to the shelf containing the ten math rods, picks the first one up, and then carries it to her work area. She does this ten times (one trip for each rod) weaving her way around other children, shelves, chairs, and tables. Once she has all of her work in place she begins working with it.

Method

This article was written during two years of ongoing fieldwork in which I spent four to five hours per day, two to three days per week at Ellis Montessori Preschool. I periodically shifted my role between observer and participant observer. During my first few visits to each room I was an observer. Then I would gradually participate more and more. When I needed to shift roles in the field I would simply leave the room for a few minutes or wait for an activity transition. After a few minutes I would quietly return and sit in the background or immerse myself in the activity. My presence was not disruptive in the classrooms because the Montessori method calls for teachers to utilize an observer role much of the time (Montessori, 1964).

Some ethnographers become "observant participants" (Wacquant, 2011) as when Loic Wacquant became a boxer, Ashley Mears (2011) became a

model, and Matthew Desmond (2007) became a wild land firefighter. In retrospect, during much of my time I was in the process of becoming a preschool teacher. It began when my time in the classrooms became normalized. The more time I spent at the school the more my identity changed with the children from "Julian's dad" to "Mr. John," although I asked them to call me "John." Similarly, I became an accepted part of the classrooms with teachers after earning their trust.

I often felt like a contributing member to the classrooms and that the teachers were depending on me for help. During lunchtime I would get milk or silverware from the kitchen if we ran out. I would help the friends accomplish tasks during work periods. Some teachers asked me questions about how to handle certain situations, say, with a distracted child or one having trouble adjusting to a new classroom. My sense was I was being tested on occasions and needed to demonstrate adequate expertise for my role (Goffman, 1959, p. 41). Over the months I was given a great deal of latitude to use my personal judgment. Sometimes this worked well, other times it did not work as well. Often, I simply deferred to the nearest *real* teacher. Deferring became my safety net when I was unable to resolve problems.

Admittedly, there were several days when I felt like a preschool teacher. I would walk into a classroom, set my yellow legal pad down, and begin saying good morning to children and teachers *as if* I were a teacher. Comforting children during difficult times, for example, attuned me to how important it is to be a stable presence in the classroom, even if my time was limited. Eventually, most teachers welcomed me as part of their classroom, which bolstered my sense of belonging. However, this was an earned trust rather than an immediate trust.

In the end, I did not attain the level of expertise required to become a professional preschool teacher, since I did not pursue a degree in early childhood education, Montessori certification, or formal employment with the school. Thus I never became an observant participant. However, I did experience many of the feelings of happiness, frustration, stress, and joy preschool teachers have on a daily basis. Yet I was insulated from the daily travails of work schedules, meetings, and parent concerns Ellis Montessori Preschool teachers face.

It took considerable work to improvise my way through the field. I did it mostly by taking an apprentice role to the teachers and using the best of

what they had to offer regarding talk and interaction with the children. I learned about the behavior model many teachers used, *Positive Discipline* (Nelsen, 2006), and familiarized myself with the Montessori method as much as possible (Montessori, 1964). I intently observed practices and participated, but deferred decisions regarding disputes to teachers until I felt confident I could sort through the issues independently. I had to prove to the teachers I could work with the children as a first step to gaining a deeper level of trust. Part of this need to prove myself emerged from the problem of being a male in a preschool.

There was distance between the teachers and myself. The teachers in the first room I observed trusted me with the children, but not enough to let me into their worlds. When discussing classroom matters, for example, they would first glance in my direction and then walk out of my range of hearing. I soon began developing strategies to build stronger trust and rapport with the teachers. My goal, like most ethnographers, was to "unmark" my identity (Pruit, 2012a) and be understood as a normal preschool teacher and become privy to insider information. There was also a side to doing research in a preschool making me accountable to parents. I had to develop recasting strategies for parents and teachers to believe I was safe. I began mimicking teachers' talk and interaction with children and developing self-presentation strategies to be accepted as a male in a preschool context.

Data

My fieldnotes include standard information about the date, time in the field, and the day's eventfulness. I took more fieldnotes during first days in a room when everything seemed fresh and different (Goffman, 1989). After a few days I began participating more in the day-to-day activities of the classrooms, returning to my notes at opportune moments, such as when the class transitioned from the classroom to the playground. I typed my fieldnotes as soon as possible after leaving the school while simultaneously making analytic notes in the margins (in markup). If something were particularly interesting I would make a note of it and come back to it later. I let analytic categories emerge from the field and then I continued observations to confirm its presence. Often, I asked the teachers about my interpretations to validate, modify, or discard them. This practice allowed

me to develop and refine conceptual categories early on, shaping my view of the field while still in it. I pursued emergent themes and broadly categorized talk and interaction as types of gender, emotion, and identity work. Fieldnotes also became a tool for me to review others and my actions and adjust/prepare for future interactions. In this manner I was able to sketch the analytic contours of my project and generate interview questions from fieldwork.

Although this article primarily relies on fieldnotes, I also conducted twenty-three interviews with preschool teachers lasting between thirty and ninety minutes. My interview guide included different themes emerging from fieldwork about preschool teachers' practical work (job duties, a typical day, et cetera) and symbolic work (identity, emotions, and gender). Interviews focused on the work of being a preschool teacher, including teaching and learning, classroom management, emotions, coping, gender, and identity. Using a thematic orientation allowed me to move through the questions conversationally as themes emerged during the interview context in a co-constructed manner (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). All participants were given pseudonyms. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Initially coding used broad themes from observations and interview questions. I then identified emergent themes for further analysis. I documented themes as forms of "interpretive practice" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). In this case, my personal experiences during fieldwork shaped interpretations of suspicion and recasting strategies.

Ethnographic Reflexivity and the Complexity of Gender

Ethnographic reflexivity is the ongoing internal conversation while participating in the field, and is important for understanding how researchers affect those within the field and how the field affects the researcher (Coffey, 1999; Delamont, 2002; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Hertz, 1997). The trend toward reflexivity is an important aspect of ethnographic research. Reflexive fieldwork is a strategic and important part of understanding one's position as a fieldworker (Van Maannen, 1988) and representational practices (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007). In particular, self-presentation strategies during fieldwork can have professional and personal consequences.

During fieldwork, for example, gender (masculinity, femininity) is often a taken for granted matter. Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) build on "gender displays" (Goffman, 1977) and ethnomethodological "doing" (Garfinkel, 1967) showing the embeddedness of gender in interactions. The complexities of gender become more pronounced during research, especially when the researcher consciously considers fieldwork as gendered "doings." Patricia Yancey Martin (2006) distinguishes between gender practices and practicing gender. Gender practices are part of the repertoire of culturally available practices to enact in a social situation (Martin, 2003, p. 354). Practicing gender comprises the "literal activities of gender" constituting the gender order (Martin, 2003, p. 354). Martin (2006) also uses a third concept called gender reflexivity, which is thinking about actions and effects related to gender *a priori*. She explains practicing gender reflexively "requires awareness and intention relative to a particular purpose" (Martin, 2006, p. 260). The everyday complexity (Pruit, 2012b) of the lived experience complicates gender practices and practicing gender. Recasting masculinity is a strategy for "doing" reflexive fieldwork. Next, I illustrate how gendered assumptions preconstruct males in preschools as suspicious.

Preconstructing Suspicion

Preconstructing suspicion characterizes men working and/or doing research in ECE as potential threats *a priori*. Men are preconstructed as pedophiles, effeminate, homosexuals, and/or potentially violent (Cameron, 2006; Cameron, Moss, and Owen, 1999; Skelton, 2003). Preconstructing suspicion questions the motives of men for working in ECE settings (Cameron, 2006; King, 1998; Sargent, 2004) and reinforces Judith Butler's (1990) argument "there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed" (Butler, 1990, p.195). Suspicion provides a backdrop for males' self-presentation strategies (King, 1998; Sargent, 2004; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). I examine three dimensions of preconstructing suspicion: casting suspicion, contextualizing suspicion, and acknowledging suspicion.

Casting Suspicion

Casting suspicion refers to my personal experience of preconstructing others as suspicious. At this time I was a parent, had no prior experience with a male preschool teacher, and was suspicious of his presence. Below, I recount my first meeting with a male preschool teacher in my son's classroom (prior to my research). It illustrates my unfortunate use of gender stereotypes, and then the realization I was preconstructing suspicion.

> I am dropping my son off at school. It is about seven forty-five in the morning. I turn toward the cubbies with my back to the majority of the classroom to give my son a hug and kiss goodbye. The lead teacher (a female) walks in and we strike up a conversation about how much my son likes listening to stories and how well he is interacting with others. I turn around to watch my son walk away to choose some work and there is a man standing in the middle of the classroom. I imagine he is a parent, but do not see any new friends in the room. I walk to him and he introduces himself as a new teacher. I feel my shoulders stiffen as I extend my hand offering a hearty handshake. I hold his eyes and hand for an extra second and puff my chest up a bit. My voice drops an octave as I introduce myself as a parent and board member. I am a lion, apparently. I begin to wonder why this guy wants to work in a preschool. What's up with this guy? I become painfully conscious of my thoughts and actions as a wave of embarrassment washes over me. I tell him I am glad to meet him and excuse myself.

His presence in the classroom was problematic, as well as emblematic of preconstructing suspicion. I characterized him as threatening, and yet I did not realize it until the situation had progressed. I questioned his presence and constructed a hierarchical relationship in two ways. First, I disclosed obvious information about being a parent. Second, I disclosed I was a board member at the school. Although I was accustomed to spending time at the school I did not problematize my presence. Being a parent normalized it. The narrative also illustrates the out-of-placeness imposed on men doing women's work. My suspicion, as embarrassing as it is now, became an important resource for me to later draw upon. After all, I would later be casted as suspicious and need to anticipate others' interpretations.

Contextualizing Suspicion

Different contexts have different rules. Contextualizing suspicion refers to the enabling or constraining of contextual rules. My first experience participating in line time was with Bill, a lead teacher in the upper school. I had been observing to get a feel for the room practices. On this day I decided to participate. The fieldnote entry below is an example of the internalization of preconstructing suspicion. In particular, how males, in this case me, monitor their behavior to reach consensus with those around them. It also reveals how preconstructing suspicion blankets males in uncertainty.

> For my first few days of doing fieldwork in the room I have been observing. Today I am participating in my first line time. We sit in a circle on the floor "crisscross applesauce" (feet underneath opposite knees). A friend asks to sit in my lap. I am not sure what to say. I don't mind, but I don't know what Bill believes is appropriate. I look at Bill for the answer. He responds affirmatively, saying, "It is John's choice whether or not you may sit in his lap." I am glad Bill and I are on the same page. I say, "You may sit in my lap. Thank you for asking."

I initially questioned my activities within this context because of my uncertainty about the rules as they apply to me – a male, a researcher, not a teacher. Although it was early in my fieldwork, I already knew males operated under a different set of constraints than females, which is why I hesitated to answer the child and looked to Bill for guidance on the matter. However, because Bill and I were the only adults in the room, the constraints of preconstructing suspicion were significantly relaxed.

Acknowledging Suspicion

Acknowledging suspicion refers to my belief others interpreted me as potentially threatening. At times I felt out of place at the school because I was different. The adults were almost all female and the majority of people were six years of age and younger. My body and voice separated me physically from almost all other people at the school. This was most acute

when I began observing in a new classroom. At these times I was keenly aware of my bodily differences. Although I had been practicing recasting masculinity, it was not until several months into fieldwork that I began grappling with it analytically.

> I am very aware of my body. Compared to the friends I am a big, lumbering sasquatch. This, along with my maleness is very apparent in the entire school, but especially in the lower school. I have been using some techniques of neutralization, to borrow a phrase from Scott and Lyman (1968) to compensate for, or mask, my masculinity.

The above fieldnote entry illuminates how being preconstructed as suspicious becomes a working part of males in ECE. In my case I felt like an out-of-place insider. I felt comfortable around the children, but knew adults were scrutinizing me. In particular, I sensed the differences between my body and those around me. My awareness of my body and using techniques to compensate for masculinity alludes to the idea I policed my gendered self. In short, I had internalized being viewed as suspicious.

The above experiences begin to illustrate how interpreting males as suspicious is normalized in preschools. It influences beliefs about appropriateness relating to context and gender, indicating who should be included and excluded from certain places. Reflexively considering suspicion enabled me to better understand and acknowledge my marginality within this setting. It also put me in touch with the marginality others endure on a daily basis, including other researchers, and reminded me I chose this experience rather than having it imposed upon me. It also shed light on the fact I could leave at any time, unlike the majority of those in marginalizing situations.

Recasting Masculinity

In the remainder of this article I will explain how I recast masculinity during fieldwork. It is not an exhaustive list. I use general description rather than specific events with the goal of providing utility across settings in which men are preconstructed as suspicious. Importantly, much of it capitalizes on personal resources, which may not be available to some

researchers. C. J. Pascoe (2007), for example, was able to use the location of her apartment in a "ghetto" to gain credibility with African American males. Each researcher, then, has usable resources, and so it is important to anticipate how to capitalize on them.

Recasting masculinity is a reflexive approach inviting researchers to consider how gender may affect data collection. For example, I had not fully considered how being a male in a female-dominated setting could affect how others interpreted me, which, in turn, could affect the type of data participants were willing to share. Recasting masculinity, then, involves anticipating how gender might influence researchers and participants. Upon realizing there were suspicions associated with being a male in ECE I began addressing how I could recast masculinity to better situate my identity. I used personalizing experiences, being accessible, making connections, and presenting a non-threatening identity to recast my masculinity.

Personalizing Experiences

Personalizing experiences involves learning about participants. It is similar to building rapport, but because the setting involves being around children I also had to build trust. I wanted to personalize my experience at the preschool because I believed it would allow others to see me as a person and not just a male body hanging around the school. I first tried to learn the names of teachers, children, and parents as quickly as possible, and to learn something about them. This amounted to about one hundred fifty people, which I learned about in one way or another.

During interactions with children I learned which type of work they enjoyed and about their personalities. During line time, for example, I noted how they interacted with teachers and other children. I was also aided by the institution's teaching philosophy. Considering one principle of the Montessori method calls for teacher observation I was able to observe with relative ease because teachers moving throughout the room is normalized. Hence I moved through the rooms freely, without worry of disturbing working children.

When learning about teachers I believed it was important to know their tendencies and routines with children, and their approach to preschool education. This knowledge allowed me to align myself with the norms of

the classroom. I would try to engage teachers about topics such as teaching philosophy and ask questions about the room norms and daily events. I found my naivety about the details of the classrooms, and Montessori teaching, to be beneficial for digging deeper into the inner workings of each room.

Speaking with parents could be complicated. I could not talk too much about their child, the school, or myself. My goal was to strike a balance between talking about the school, their child's classroom, their child, and myself. I found it beneficial for me to know their child's name, something about the child, and about the classroom and teachers. My goal was for parents to know me as part of the preschool scene. Most often I let parents steer the conversation in a direction comfortable for them.

With each group, I believe it was important for me to share about myself. I was open and honest when asked questions. Teachers would ask about various items, but it was almost always related to the school or my research. When friends desired my attention I gave it to them. And, when parents had questions or just wanted to talk I was there for that too. My goal in being honest was to show them I was a trustworthy person, and that I was not a threat to the school or the children.

Being Accessible

Being accessible relates to personalizing experiences in that it is a way to continue building trust and rapport. While personalizing experiences is not always about gender neutralization, being accessible gets more to the heart of the matter because it defuses suspicious assumptions about males' behaviors around children. Again, it demonstrated to those observing me I had adequate qualifications to be around young children.

Nancy Mandlell's (1988) "least-adult" role approach elicited its own type of suspicion from the teachers who questioned whether she was responsible enough to be left alone with the children. She also had to prove to the children she was not a typical adult, which left her performing a balancing act and potentially alienating one group of participants. I never took on the least-adult role when interacting with friends since my concern was with preschool teachers. However, I made sure the friends knew they had my complete attention when they wanted it, believing the teachers would observe me, building rapport indirectly. When a friend approached

me I would stop what I was doing, look directly at them, and listen to their words. At the same time, I would kneel so that we were at eye level with each other. This let them know they were important to me because they had my complete attention. I would listen to them and respond in a conversation voice (low volume), even when on the playground. It was important to me to never speak loudly around them so I carried this routine over to the playground, as well.

I also made myself available to encourage the children and answer questions. I made myself accessible for hugs, holding hands, and encouraging the children. Admittedly, receiving dozens of hugs each day made me feel important and welcome. Children also frequently asked questions like "Where's Julian? [my son]" or "Whose dad are you?" I would then explain whom my son was and that he was at a new school. Or, they might ask, "Why are you here?" I would reply I was doing observations. Some would ask, "What are you writing?" and I would explain to them I was writing about the different things I saw. I would usually ask them if they wanted to see, and more often than not they did. I would show them my fieldnotes (most had not learned to read yet), which would satisfy their curiosity and demystify my actions. It also let them know I was open and present for them no matter what I was doing.

Lastly, I paid close attention to my body. I am six feet tall and have an athletic build, so I found it best to compensate for having a bigger body than those around me. My goal was to minimize the space I took up to be more like the adults the children were accustomed to being around at the school. Hence, I actively attempted to make myself appear smaller. I tried not to stand for long periods of time, I knelt when speaking with friends, and when sitting I tried to minimize the space I took up. When sitting on the floor I sat "crisscross applesauce" (knees over opposite foot) or on my knees creating more space around me. When I sat in a chair (all the chairs were for children), for example, I would keep my knees together, my feet drawn close to me, and arms close to my body, because sitting with my legs straight out in front of me would create a tripping hazard. My belief was if I could use less space and look more like the teachers, then I would somehow blend into the scene.

Making Connections

Making connections relates to being accessible and personalizing experiences in that it pertains to becoming more embedded in the field. Having been initially accepted as a presence in the rooms, making connections marks a turn in the relationships. It involves two senses of reciprocity. First, it means forging connections with participants, and can be personal or professional. By "personal" I do not mean seeking out teachers to share secrets with, but instead being receptive to the thoughts and feelings of participants and trying to demonstrate empathy. Second, it means being willing to reciprocate for the opportunity to do research. In other words, research is a two way street where researchers are now expected to share at least some parts of their life with those in the field.

Perhaps the best way I found to build trust and rapport was to speak with the teachers about whatever they wanted to speak about. It usually involved the children, teaching practices, or the teachers' children. On some occasions teachers would tell me how they were feeling, especially if the day was particularly "crazy" or "stressful." In these moments I was receptive to their feelings and reassured them I had felt the same way and they were not alone. There were some occasions when a teacher would ask my professional opinion about a friend or what I would do in a specific situation. This always made me a little nervous because I knew it was partially for my input and partially a test of my expertise. When teachers asked for my opinion it symbolized trust to me.

Making connections involved sharing details about my life with those I encountered. In such instances I did my best to be open and honest with them. I was fortunate to have similar beliefs about the importance of ECE and many other issues, which meant I rarely disagreed with those at the school. My personal resources were valuable for connecting with teachers. My goal was to build bridges of interest between the teachers and myself and show them I was not just a male or a male researcher. When teacher talk involved family, I was able to use talk about "my wife" or "my son" (Kitzinger, 2005) proving valuable in many ways (with teachers and parents). It signaled I was family oriented. I shared a similar set of concerns with many of the teachers and could understand, for example, the push/pull of being a working parent. Brief interactions often ended up having a positive effect with the teachers.

When speaking with preschool teachers I was always courteous, engaging, and understanding. My goal was to connect my personal life to the teachers' lives to better understand their lived experience. Furthermore, reciprocity was always on my mind so I presented myself as a person prepared to help. I performed a range of tasks from helping friends put their coats on, to going to the kitchen for milk and silverware, to listening to teachers' concerns. In each case, I adopted the role of someone accessible to the needs of the classroom and found a little help went a long way.

Presenting a Non-Threatening Identity

Presenting a non-threatening identity may be the most important strategy for a male researching ECE, and preschools in particular. It relates to making connections in that it continues relying on personal resources. It mostly applies to interactions with parents and also utilizes symbolic displays for impression management (Goffman, 1959). The goal is to show participants directly and indirectly that the researcher's presence is non-threatening to the social order of the setting. However, recasting masculinity takes traditional and non-traditional forms. Rather than directly declaring a non-threatening status, I used my personal resources to display a non-threatening identity.

Since the parents were not at the school most of the day I had to build trust and rapport with them during drop off and pick up directly and indirectly through word of mouth and impression management displays. Direct attempts involved discussing with parents specific aspects of my research or their children. Displaying knowledge about a parent's child, for example, was an acceptable way to express interest in the personal lives of the parents without being offensive. The direct means I used were to introduce myself as a researcher and tell parents about my research project. Some of the parents remembered me from when my son had attended the school, which made justifying my presence relatively straightforward. Others asked questions and wanted to know more. These conversations usually lasted long enough for us to find some sort of common ground (usually something about their child or the school) giving parents an opportunity to learn about me.

Parents (and teachers) also learned about me indirectly through symbolic displays. I adorned myself with the symbols of a researcher, a member of

the school, and as a married person. I signaled my researcher identity by having my yellow legal tablet for fieldnotes nearby and a pen or pencil resting on my ear. I signaled a school identity by wearing clothes similar to the teachers, including shirts advertising the school, often passing as a teacher, and by moving and interacting with the friends in a similar manner as the teachers. Sometimes parents would assume I was an employee and disregard my presence. Lastly, I played sexual politics against the idea males in early childhood education are threats by announcing my heterosexual identity by using my wedding band as a collective representation of heterosexual status. Indirect symbolic displays helped normalize my presence and deflect suspicion.

Conclusion

In this article I propose a reflexive orientation to fieldwork and the application of a gender recasting strategy to help build trust and rapport with research participants. Anticipating and actively adjusting to the field potentially influences others' contextual interpretations, especially when there are differences between those in the field and the researcher. I used recasting masculinity as a strategy to help disarm preconstructed suspicions constraining access to the field. The goal of recasting masculinity is to deemphasize gender by presenting other characteristics as primary characteristics of fieldworker identity.

Consequentially important are the reasons for gender recasting strategies. Men in ECE have their identities preconstructed as suspicious. This suspicion characterizes them as threats to the safety of children. Suspicion generally includes the potential for men being violent, effeminate, homosexual, and/or pedophiles. Preconstructing males as suspicious contributes to fewer men working in ECE. Men working as teachers or researchers in ECE develop strategies to negotiate the problem of suspicion, which warrants further analysis of preschool teachers' lived experience in relation to suspicion.

As with all fieldwork strategies, there are constraints, tradeoffs, and benefits with recasting masculinity. Being accessible to the friends, for example, helped build trust with teachers, but also meant I was spending a significant amount of time away from observing the teachers. However, this allowed me to experience what it was like to be a preschool teacher.

Similarly, my desire to reciprocate occasionally took me away from the classrooms, but secured my place at the school. While connecting with the teachers I shared details of my life, which could cause issues for those with differing views. Hence I was mindful of what I was presenting and how I was doing it. A final example is flashing my heterosexual credentials by wearing my wedding band. Although I believe it benefitted by minimizing suspicion and desexualizing me, my preference would have been to rely on my professional identity markers to help secure trust and rapport. Thus the symbolism of my wedding band relied on traditional understandings of masculinity, heterosexuality, heterosexism, and hegemony to normalize my presence at the preschool.

Weaknesses of recasting masculinity include some researchers not having a similar repertoire of personal resources to draw upon (Soyer, forthcoming), such as being married and/or having a child. Additionally, recasting masculinity applies to males, although recasting strategies can be adapted to researcher and setting. Strengths include emphasizing reflexivity by constantly attuning the researcher to interaction with those in the field, the setting, and one's self. It also is a potential avenue to get closer to those in the field and gain more in-depth data. For example, I was able to understand the everyday strategies male preschool teachers use to present themselves as non-threatening because I engaged in similar behavior. Recasting masculinity also encourages constant assessment of researcher practice and creativity in the field asking the fieldworker to have self accountability and accountability to participants suggesting a more nuanced approach to field identity and positionality. Last, because it is a strategy evolving from the use of talk, interaction, and symbols, the researcher is able to analytically reflect on personal practices, hone them, and then incorporate them into analysis.

Conceptually, recasting masculinity (or femininity, for that matter) is most useful in uncovering the "seen but unnoticed" (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 36) assumptions embedded in research settings. For example, my research setting is a female-dominated education site. The pervading preconstructed suspicions in early childhood education include males being threats to young children, unable to care properly for them, effeminate, homosexual, violent, and/or pedophiles. While preconstructing suspicion applies to males, it also marginalizes females by naturalizing them as caretakers and reducing them to second-class statuses. This stresses the importance of

recognizing how the embeddedness of power, or lack of power, regarding suspicion (about gender, race, ethnicity, and class) culturally, institutionally, and personally underlies social life. In most cases power is an unspoken pact between tradition, discourse, and everyday practice in which researchers have an opportunity to give voice to previously naturalized practices.

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