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Main Article:

Catching Gender-Identity Production in Flight: Making the Commonplace Visible

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to develop and illustrate an approach for making the commonplace visible in a natural, as opposed to manipulated, social setting. The key research task was to find a way of capturing the ongoing production or enactment of the self that provides some insight into the way in which it is produced in a routine, matter of fact way. The article takes a number of steps to develop a research approach to the task. First, gender-identity was selected as a more specific aspect of self-production. Second, the concept of “flashpoints” was used to refer to a particular moment in the routine which achieves some significance or salience as a result of the participants seizing upon some otherwise unremarkable action or statement and twisting it to their purpose. In this study, the purpose was gender-identity creation. Primary school children in the classroom and their teachers were the participants of the study. Through the use of flashpoints, the article demonstrates how gender-identity production of these children can be caught in flight. The article concludes that this approach can be added to the researcher’s toolkit.

Keywords: gender-identity; self-identity; research method; social constructionism

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1. Making of the Self

Postmodern and reflexive theories of the self reach strong convergence on the view that the self is instantiated in practice where the self exists only in its enactment. According to these theories, the self is socially constructed. Foucault (2002) refers to “fabrication” of

the subject with its double meaning of construction and falsification. Rose (1996) refers to the “invention of self” and Gergen (1994) refers to the self as an “eddy” in the ongoing flow of social practices. Butler (1990) refers to the self, or more specifically gender-identity, as a form of “performativity,” something that exists only through its performance, and Giddens (1991) considers self-identity as an “intersubjective instantiation” where “longitudinal integrity” is actively constructed by the agent.

Following Schatzki (1996), these theories may be referred to as *practice theories*. As practice theories, they all place the “doings and sayings” of people, their social practices, as ontologically prior to the agent (subject, mind, self) or to the totality (society). From this perspective, we become human and develop our agency through the engagement and sharing in the activities of others. Our doings and sayings are the basic social building blocks of our agency and our world. This perspective is shared by Foucault (1978, 2002), the English Foucauldian Nikolas Rose (e.g., Rose, 1996), and those influenced by Wittgenstein, such as Giddens (1984), the ethnomethodologist Garfinkel (1967) (cf. Coulter, 1989; Heritage, 1984) and the social constructivist school of psychology (e.g., Gergen, 1994; Harré & Gillet, 1994; Shotter, 1995, 2006).

The purpose of this article is to develop and illustrate an approach to observe this fabrication, construction, or production of self and to provide a method that can serve in the researcher’s methodological toolkit when the researcher wishes to observe the ongoing production of self in a natural setting. A strong and important criticism of postmodern theory concerns the difficulty of developing the theories for empirical examination and observation (e.g., Held & Thompson, 1989). If indeed the self is constructed, could not this construction be observed or inferred from those empirical observations? The purpose of this article is not to develop a postmodern theory of the self or to compare it against current psychological theories. Excellent surveys of the mainstream psychological approaches and postmodern approaches can be found elsewhere (Elliott, 2008; Gergen, 1984; Johns, Robins, & Pervin, 2008; Leary & Tangney, 2003). Rather the purpose here is to examine and discuss: (a) a method that can be potentially added to the researcher’s toolbox and (b) whether other methods, most notably field and formal interviews and the breach experiments pioneered by Garfinkel (1967; cf. use of feminist fairytales by Davies [1989]), can supplement and test the observations. This is done by investigating the production of gender-identity among primary school children in the classroom.

The challenge then is to engage these postmodern, practice theories for empirical investigation of the self. To paraphrase Foucault (2002), the challenge is to observe how we turn ourselves into a subject. The first obstacle to observation is the nature of intersubjectivity and the self itself. Our intersubjective world and our selves are what Garfinkel (1967) refers to as “contingent accomplishments.” The self from this practice theory approach is not a thing but a practice existing only in the doing, something like music or a dance (Gregg, 1991). The challenge is, first, to find a way to reveal and unpick the theorised seams of our intersubjective world that seem so effortlessly and routinely created and, second, to view how we draw upon it in our intersubjective world for this Indian rope trick of self-invention.

A further problem concerns the very breadth of the practices of the self. The self may cover such wide and varied practices such as self-identity and social-identity, who we think we are or wish to be, its longitudinal integrity or continuity, the groups we identify with or are identified by, and so forth. It may also refer to our introspection and subjectivity, our mind, our unconscious and the outcomes of internal struggles, or simply that which others recognise as being “just like you to do that” (McAdams, 1995). This article is based on a research that required a more specific aspect of the self to focus on, lest in the attempt to cover these wide and diverse aspects of the self, the research might not succeed in covering anything. The research needed to focus on an aspect of the self that could highlight the accomplishment of self and how the agent involved in this accomplishment draws on the resources of the social world.

The aspect of self selected for examination and exploration was that of gender-identity. Gender and gender-identity are central to self. It is virtually inconceivable to think of one’s self without gender. One’s gender is very much part of oneself in all the aspects described above, such as social-identity, the nature of our subjectivity, and the biographical continuity of self.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the theoretical approach to gender-identity in practice theory also closely parallels its approach to self. The postmodern theory of Butler (1990) and ethnomethodological theory of West and Zimmerman (1987) both argue that, like the practice theories of the self, gender also exists only in its enactment, its instantiation. To use West and Zimmerman’s term, people “do gender” rather than have a core or essence of some gender. Our gender is continuously made and the doing of gender reflects our understandings of our gender-identity. Gender-identity, that is, those aspects of ourselves that are especially coloured by the production and presentation of ourselves as gendered beings provided a less nebulous and a more particular aspect of self for empirical study. By observing people doing gender, the production of gender-identity was observed and inferences could be made about the production of self and, more generally, the active participation of the subject in its own construction.

The first step in developing a method for observing gender-identity production was to use school-age children as subjects. Children are possibly not only more busily engaged in identity work than adults, but as neophytes, their gender-identity work may be more naïve and more obvious.

A reading of the research literature also suggested that children were virtually obsessed with gender. For children, doing gender “correctly” was a form and measure of social competency that they were practising and refining (e.g., Cahill, 1986; Davies, 1989; Paley, 1984; Thorne, 1993). Doing gender correctly meant for the children to identify with their appropriate gender, dress, mannerisms, and behaviours. The cartoon cited by Davies (1989) in her introduction where a young boy and girl are looking at a picture of Adam and Eve sums up the children’s inexperience, their wanting to know, but also their understanding of gender as a construction. One child asks the other, “Which one is the man and woman?” to which the other replies, “I don’t know, they both haven’t any clothes on.”

To some extent, the move from self-identity to gender-identity and from adults to children can appear to be simply problem shifting. The fundamental empirical problems remain: How to observe this production? Can gender-identity processes be observed or inferred through fieldwork? Can gender-identity production be caught in “mid-flight”? Can the seams of its production be glimpsed? The search was to find a method that could allow the observer the kinds of observational and reporting powers of the eponymous “man without qualities” of the Robert Musil novel (Musil, 1979; cf. Berger, 1971).

2. Catching Gender-Identity Production in Flight

The key practical problem of the study was to make visible or identify the routine, everyday doing of gender and identity. How does one make “commonplace scenes visible” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 36)? Gender-identity production is a routine and continuous process and all action may be gendered to some degree (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Because the focus was on the construction or production of gender-identity, not the outcome of that construction, the methodological problem was to decide what particular actions, activities, or events should be researched, and how to do that in a way that was transparent and open to rational discourse.

One possibility was to examine the commonplace by studying disturbances to the commonplace or, alternatively, through the study of the pathological, where the commonplace has broken down. Following Foucault, Rose (1996) advocated the notion of *problematization*, by considering where and what things have become problems to our everyday practices and understandings. Rose argues that in the genealogical method, the pathological has primacy over the normal and that:

This is a methodological as much an epistemological point; in the genealogy of subjectification, pride of place is not occupied by the philosophers reflecting in their studies on the nature of the person, the will, the conscience, morality, and the like, but rather in the everyday practices where conduct has become problematic to others or oneself, and in the mundane texts and programs--on asylum management, medical treatment of women, advisable regimes of child rearing, new ideas in workplace management, improving one's self-esteem--seeking to render these problems intelligible and at the same time, manageable. (Rose, 1996, p. 26)

A possibly better-known example of this approach of investigating the normal by considering departures from the normal was from Garfinkel (1967), famous for his use of pathology and exaggeration in his small-scale experiments.

Procedurally it is my preference to start with familiar scenes and ask what can be done to make trouble. The operations that one would have to perform in order to multiply the senseless features of perceived environments; to produce and sustain bewilderment, consternation, and confusion; to produce the socially structured affects of anxiety, shame, guilt, and indignation; and to produce disorganized interaction should tell us something about how the

structures of everyday activities are ordinarily and routinely produced and maintained. (Garfinkel, 1967, pp. 37-38)

For example, in his famous breach of trust experiments, his confederates persistently refused to understand the situation (Garfinkel, 1990). Davies (1989) used a similar approach with her feminist fairy tales that unsettle and provoke the children to repair the story along some sort of conventional line.

These are important and well founded approaches, however the empirical challenge was to see if the production of gender-identity could be observed in situ, to catch the production of gender in flight, as it occurs in a natural as opposed to a contrived setting. The location chosen to study the children in situ was the classroom. The classroom is a rich and productive site in which to observe gender and identity processes in their day-to-day setting and as they naturally or spontaneously occur. The classroom also had the advantage of it being a potential site of contestation between the children and the teacher: to what extent were the gender-identities being produced a result by the implicit and explicit actions of the teachers and to what extent could the children's actions be explained as being of their own making.

3. What to Observe: Focusing on Flashpoints

The most problematic aspect of this in-situ observation approach was to decide what to observe from the profusion of events occurring within a classroom. The concept of *flashpoint* (Skelton, 1997) was adapted to provide a focus to the classroom observations.

The idea of flashpoints was initially developed to capture the predisposing factors surrounding public disorder (Troyna & Hatcher, 1992; Waddington, Jones, & Critcher, 1989). Waddington et al. recognised the difficulty of defining a flashpoint. They “assumed that a flashpoint was a dramatic break in a pattern of *interaction* which might help to explain why and where disorder broke out” (Waddington, Jones, & Critcher, 1989, p. 21, emphasis in original). In this study, the focus was not on the predisposing factors so much as the actual incident, a moment of some significance that changes the course of a social interaction and one that makes gender-identity and hence the making of self salient.

The idea and use of flashpoint is an emerging research approach. In this research, flashpoints are turning points in a social interaction but do not have the autobiographical poignancy of fateful or critical moments in the sense used by Giddens (1991; cf. Thomson, Bell, Holland, Henderson, McGrellis, & Sharpe, 2002). They are moments of psychological and sociological significance where some aspect of interaction is made clear or salient but they are not necessarily turning points in one's life.

Flashpoints are moments when our declarations and performances “work internally to reconstruct the momentary space of possibilities available . . . to shrivel up, or open out, say, one's own or another's reality” (Shotter, 1995, p. 167). Harré and Gillett (1994) refer to this process as “signification” where the meanings invoked changes the character of

the situation. They point out, for example, that the statement *I love you* immediately changes the situation. In this research, my method is based on the conjecture that gender-identity production can be caught in mid-flight during such a flashpoint, where gender-identity appears to suddenly intrude into the progress of a social situation and changes, opens, or closes the interaction in some way. These glimpses will be fleeting and subtle, but nevertheless revealing.

Flashpoints or moments and situations approaching flashpoint status are by definition unlikely to be common events. Nor are they necessarily readily or unambiguously recognisable. The methodological challenge was to develop an observational strategy that was able to identify flashpoints either within a field setting or retrospectively.

Empirical observation generally, and in particular those undertaken in an everyday setting, have two interrelated methodological problems. The first problem is the recurring problem of deciding what to observe and attend to in the field setting. How can we recognise flashpoints and observe their key elements? The second problem is to minimise the effects caused by the presence of the researcher and the distortions caused by the researcher's presuppositions.

A problem of interviews and in particular observations is that it is very difficult to know what is actually happening until after it has occurred, until subsequent events reveal and reflection has worked something out. This is well put by Garfinkel (1967):

The investigator frequently must elect among alternative courses of interpretation and inquiry to the end of deciding matters of fact, hypothesis, conjecture, fancy, and the rest, despite the fact that in the calculable sense of the term "know," he does not and cannot even "know" what he is doing prior to or while he is doing it. Field workers, most particularly those doing ethnographic and linguistic studies in settings where they cannot presuppose a knowledge of social structures, are perhaps best acquainted with such situations. (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 78)

Garfinkel points out issues such as what to observe and how to interpret phenomena bedevils not only ethnographic approaches but all sociological endeavours. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 146) suggest that the resolution of this problem is achieved, in part, by using an emergent design and allowing the focus of the research to emerge as the study progresses.

Garfinkel's solution, based on Weber and Mannheim, is to propose the "documentary method of interpretation." Following Mannheim, the documentary method involves attempting to identify "an identical homologous pattern underlying a vast variety of totally different realizations of meaning" (Mannheim, cited in Garfinkel, 1967, p. 78). Each individual appearance is seen as a "document of" or pointing towards an underlying pattern. In a hermeneutical fashion, what is known of the underlying pattern is itself used to interpret each individual appearance.

Garfinkel refers to this process as “fact production” and goes further, arguing that the documentary method is the routine method that people employ to understand and engage with everyday life. Garfinkel’s experiments were often attempts at catching “fact production” in mid-flight (Heritage, 1984). In this study, the approach was to use the idea of flashpoints to glimpse the disjointed moment in the otherwise apparently seamless and evolving process of gender-identity production.

4. Nature and Context of Research

Observing and recording flashpoints in a field setting is a form of intervention in the activities of the participants and careful attention to this intervention and its consequences form an important part of the research and understandings of the flashpoints. In this study, the intervention planned was to video-record, observe, and undertake field interviews of children and their teachers in the classroom.

4.1. Interactive and Reflective Observer

It is well recognised that research is a form of intervention that can change the behaviours and actions of the participants. This might occur simply by the presence of the researcher: it might be the result of a form of Hawthorne Effect, the development of the relationship between the researcher and the participants, and the questions asked (e.g., Bourdieu, 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). People will act differently simply because of the presence of another and the gender, age, class, and interests of that person will, in complex ways, change behaviour.

Similarly, the researcher is a participant in the research process who brings along hopes, fears, expectations, and human capabilities and limitations. The gender of the researcher forms part of study: the relationships developed with teachers and students and the sensibility of the researcher is influenced by gender. There is no objective standpoint.

The question was how to address the issues of intervention and standpoint in the research. Bourdieu (1999) summarised these issues and proposed that the post-positivist response is to address these matters reflexively:

The positivist dream of an epistemological state of perfect innocence papers over the fact that the crucial difference is not between a science that effects a construction and one that does not, but between a science that does this without knowing it and one that, being aware of work of construction, strives to discover and master as completely as possible the nature of its inevitable acts of construction and the equally inevitable effects those acts produce. (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 608)

Specifically, Bourdieu calls for a “reflex reflexivity,” a sociological feel or eye that monitors these effects as they take place. The interviewer or observer should be as close in terms of social distance as possible, however, where this is not possible, provide an environment where the interviewees may “legitimately be themselves” without

pretending that the social distance has vanished. This requires mentally “putting oneself in their place” but is not limited to empathy. Putting oneself in their place does not by itself produce good questions.

Good interviewers and field observers intervene and take up issues, allow the participants--both interviewer and interviewee--to exchange views and to appropriate the research process (Bourdieu, 1999; Kvale, 1996). Little or no intervention may mean that potentially revealing avenues remain closed.

This reflex reflexivity response, rather than removing the researcher, supports Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) naturalistic approach that utilises the human as instrument. By this, Lincoln and Guba argued that the researcher uses himself or herself, and others, as the “primary data gathering instruments” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 39). They argued that any other instruments, such as paper and pencil testing, could not a priori be sufficiently adaptable:

. . . because of the understanding that all instruments interact with respondents and objects but that only the human instrument is capable of grasping and evaluating the meaning of that differential interaction; because the intrusion of instruments intervene in the mutual shaping of other elements and that shaping can be appreciated and evaluated only by a human; and because all instruments are value-based and interact with local values but only the human is in a position to identify and take into account (to some extent) those resulting biases. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 39-40)

The importance of their approach is to recognise that social research involves a social relationship between researcher and participant and that this relationship needs to be recognised and addressed in the research method.

A reflexive process is also required in the analysis process of the research. The distorting eye of theory is also an inevitable part of the analysis. We must not only reduce and recognise social distance, but we must also see how our theories, presuppositions, and questions influence and produce the interactions, observations, and recordings. Our theoretical lens is on the other hand also creative, as it is from our theory that our questions and approaches derive.

The approach taken was that suggested by Kvale (1996). This was to extensively discuss the different readings of the observations with colleagues. This was a form of “calling to account” of the observation and description where the focus was on what in the observation was critical, how robust that observation or description was and whether the observation or description was open to alternative readings. In particular the gendered perspectives of the various episodes and particular observations and the researcher’s description of them were discussed with colleagues. At times the interpretations were changed; at other times the descriptions became more precise and detailed. To this extent, the analytical process was a collegial one.

4.2. Children in Classrooms

The field observations and interviews were undertaken in the classrooms of five separate classes for Grade 3 children drawn from two separate public schools in a capital city of Australia. The children were mostly 8 or 9 years of age. Gaining entry into the school system to undertake the study took a little over a year. Approval was sought and obtained from the relevant university and State education ethics committees. Principals of schools were consulted and the study was presented to teachers' meetings, to the Grade 3 teachers, and student carers; parents were advised and approval to interview the children was obtained.

Prior to the commencement of the study, the researcher was introduced to the students. Students were excited by the prospect of having the novelty of the researcher in their classroom and asked about the researcher's personal background, family, and interests. The children were curious and welcoming and this continued throughout the observations in the classroom.

The initial study design was to videotape the classes and ethics approval and parental permission for videotaping had been obtained. However, at the first school, on the arranged day for videotaping, the three teachers of the classes to be videotaped met the researcher and regretfully informed him that while they still were very willing to participate in the study, they now felt uncomfortable about being videotaped. It was decided then to take field notes in a notebook. As it turned out, field observations at this school were far richer than at the school where videotaping was permitted.

There were three chief reasons for this. First, in all classes there were children where permission to videotape had not been obtained. The initial plan was that those children (three in both classes) to go to another classroom during the videotaping sessions. However, when the observations commenced the teachers asked that the students remain in the classroom and be placed behind the camera. The problem for videotaping was that in the classes there was considerable movement of children around the class, either spontaneous or teacher directed. This meant that the researcher spent almost more effort moving the camera to avoid videotaping children than videotaping the children. A particular problem was that much of the material of interest occurred while the children and teacher were moving from one activity to another, precisely at the time the video camera was turned away to avoid videotaping children. The second problem was the field of vision was too small and the children were keenly aware of the camera movements. Observations of interest were obscured or had either stopped or changed by the time the video camera was focussed on the interaction. Finally, for these reasons, the researcher was trapped behind the video camera and had little flexibility of movement. Less rapport between the researcher and the teachers and especially the children was gained in these classrooms. The researcher also felt much closer to those examples observed and recorded by hand than by videotape in spite of writing up field notes following each videotaping session. None of the examples provided below was videotaped.

5. Indicative Results: Flashpoints Observed

The purpose of this article is not to report on the findings but only to illustrate a method or technique. Nevertheless the proof of the pudding is in the eating: What sorts of finding arose from the method? Did the method indeed catch gender-identity production in flight or, alternatively, question the idea of ongoing social construction of self? The following vignettes present some illustrative examples of the method where something of gender-identity construction occurs.

5.1. “When I was a Little Girl”

In the following flashpoint, a loose, personal statement from the teacher changes the atmosphere of the class and gender lines are clearly drawn.

It is after lunch. The weather is unseasonably warm. The children are lethargic and the mild winter sun is streaming into the classroom. The teacher is on her chair and has been reading a chapter of a story, “Charlotte’s Web,” to the children. Most of the children are on the mat in the place at the front of the classroom. Many of the girls on the floor have moved around behind and beside the teacher. The girls often clustered themselves around the teacher in this way when permitted or tolerated by the teacher. They would slowly move closer and closer to the teacher until they, like the teacher, were facing the boys. Conversely, the boys would invariably move back and towards the sides, using the wall as a backrest. A gap between the first and rear row of girls has emerged. Two are plaiting or playing with another girl’s hair. The girls who have gained the privilege of sitting at their table are quiet; they look like they are daydreaming. The boys on the floor are quiet too. There is no argy bargy. Everyone appears sleepy but attentive as the chapter finishes.

The teacher begins to ask questions about the book and is trying to get them to talk about farm life. Nobody is answering the questions, even the girls. The teacher changes tack.

She says: “When I was a little girl, I lived on a farm . . .”

At the word *girl* there is a tremendous shift. From taking almost no notes, the observer goes into an observational and writing frenzy. Was the low, barely audible groan coming from the rear row of boys real or imagined? The girls behind the teacher stop plaiting and move themselves immediately so that they can see the teacher. The girls behind the other girls spontaneously leapfrog forward. By the time I glance at the girls at the tables, all their bodily attention is fixed on the teacher. Those boys who were not already leaning back on their arms are doing so now. Some are looking at each other, some exchange words. They notice the interest of the girls and their own lack of interest as a defining difference between them and the girls and, quite possibly, between them and the teacher. The physical

gap between the boys and girls is now quite large. It appears to be a metaphor of difference.

As this occurred, the teacher sat up from her intimate listening posture. She recognised the shift that had occurred in the class. She made a banal observation of farm life about cows and sunshine and began to discipline the class into order. She drew the lesson to a close.

In this flashpoint, the classroom went from torpidity to high voltage in a flash. The girls were clearly and spontaneously interested in the teacher's life as a girl on a farm. The boys appeared to show some sort of collective solidarity, saying as if, "We are not interested in this." The flashpoint turned on the term *girl*. It united the teacher and the girls. The focus was now not on farm life, as the teacher intended, but on being a girl and the teacher as a girl. From a simple statement, the girls seized the teacher's words and made gender salient. The girls made something out of almost nothing--a somewhat careless statement. They were pulling gender-identity out of the statement. The boys were having none of this, defining themselves, at least at this point, as the other. The class had split into two parts, separated along clear gender lines: the girls, all of whom appeared keenly interested, and the boys, who all clearly showed they were not at all interested. The teacher recognised both the intimacy with the girls and the distance from the boys and did not follow her train of thought following this statement.

It was quite common in all the classes observed for the girls to sit on the floor immediately in front of the teacher. The girls would also often try to sit beside the teacher and turn to face the rest of the class and they would also volunteer for teacher-like activities. Such observations provided support for Walkerdine's view that the girls generally identified with the female teacher (Walkerdine, 1990). The boys would invariably sit at the rear of the class or, if not at the rear, to one side.

5.2. "Getting the Strap"

The children are sitting on the floor reading copperplate script. The children are taking it in turns to read aloud a story about schooling from the olden days. A girl is reading a sentence about corporal punishment. A boy suddenly exclaims:

"My father got the strap, and my uncle."

The class springs to life. Both boys and girls are interested but the boys are noticeably so. I overhear boys talking about boys getting the strap. They are proud. Unasked and without asking permission, a boy says to the classes that girls didn't get the strap; they had to write out lines instead. The teacher asks whether they would prefer to get the strap than writing out. The boys are unanimous:

“Yes”, they all cry, more or less simultaneously. The teacher asks some girls who are sitting in a line in front.

“No!!” each says in turn. The final girl in the line is asked. She thinks hard.

“Yes, the strap.” The class appears shocked. Disbelief.

“Why?” asks the teacher.

[pause] “Because that way it would all be over quickly.”

The tension falls.

This flashpoint has several elements. The children are engaging in quite a routine learning activity. The purpose is to familiarise the children with different scripts and fonts. The book is a standard educational textbook produced by the State educational department. The children appear to be paying attention to the task; however, they gave no indication that they found the content interesting. They possibly found it slightly dull.

The boy’s statement appeared to come out of the blue. The class became interested and boys in particular were excited. Getting the strap defined gender. It was a moment in which gender became salient; boys got the strap and girls did lines. The boy had made something exciting. He had pulled out, created, or stirred up a gender difference from the somewhat bland exercise. The second aspect of the flashpoint is that, to the boys’ eyes, getting the strap is something heroic. It is perhaps not surprising that the boy draws attention to something he considers flattering to his gender.

The girls’ responses are also interesting. They dutifully reply, as they typically do, they have read the moment as one of gender definition and reply as “girls.” Only the final girl potentially spoils this mutual differentiation along gender lines, unsettling the pattern. The class was shocked; there was an uneasy silence and a sudden mounting pressure. Has she misread the situation? Is she contesting the boys? What is her explanation? Her stoical response satisfied the children. It was not interpreted as a challenge to the boys. She had not said something like, “Girls are as strong and as tough as boys.” It was in all probability seen as an idiosyncrasy of the girl in question.

5.3. “Cute”

A girl comes late into class; the others have just been dismissed from the floor. She has a range of colourful butterfly clips carefully arranged in her hair. The effect is very striking, she looks cute, I think. She walks over to the teacher. I watch intently, trying to hide my interest. How will the teacher handle this? I wonder. The teacher says, “You look cute.” The girl smiles in appreciation; the teacher glances at me with a worried expression.

There are a number of parts to this flashpoint. Firstly, the girl initiated the situation and the teacher needed to respond. The observer saw the child and immediately thought she looked cute. The observer rightly anticipated that this was going to be a difficult situation for the teacher. The girl had gone to some effort and that effort needed, even cried out for, acknowledgement. On the other hand, the girl was conforming to a particular stereotype of femininity and identity as a girl that was understood by teachers to be unfashionable in pedagogy and general society, and to be limiting girls' horizons. To acknowledge was to reinforce and support that stereotype but not to acknowledge her was to ignore the girl.

The teacher responded, giving the observer a worried glance, signifying her discomfort with the situation while the observer tried to look as unconcerned and as neutral as possible. Her glance signified discomfort with what was a difficult, no-win situation. Her response is interesting. On the one hand, she responded truthfully and stated exactly how the observer also saw the child. To this extent, it was honest, accurate, and apt. On the other hand, it can readily be seen as reinforcing the girl's femininity and wish to dress up in such a highly gender-marked way.

In this flashpoint, like all the flashpoints, there was no "time out" for the teacher. The teacher had to respond immediately. In hindsight, or with training, alternative responses may be more readily available; however as we will see in the illustration below, it is not uncommon for children to seek out and create these gender-defining situations. Moreover, the teacher in this case must balance between competing educational and social ends: avoiding reinforcing a gender stereotype on the one hand and speaking honestly to the girl on the other. To ignore or fail to engage with the child might have had worse educative and social outcomes for the girl. This may well be an almost routine dilemma for teachers, for as children in their efforts to define themselves and others as gendered selves, force adults to deal with them in that way or else, as in this case, risk failing to meet the child.

5.4. "Late to the Mat"

Throughout the observations it was commonplace for boys to be late in coming from their tables to the front of the class to sit on the mat. It was also very commonplace for them to be rebuked often quite severely for being late or for engaging in boisterous and noisy behaviour on the way to the mat. With few exceptions, these rebukes and disciplinary actions by the teachers were more or less ignored and "like water off a duck's back" for the boys. On two separate occasions, two (different) girls were late to the mat and were spoken to more harshly and directly than was observed for any other girls previously (or subsequently). They were spoken to in the tone typically reserved for the boys. One of the girls was quite visibly upset and teary. The other girl looked unhappy. The girls did not respond with the boys' typical casual and nonchalant appearance. Both girls appeared withdrawn and neither girl participated in the subsequent discussion on the mat.

This was a flashpoint or turning point for the observer. It seemed in these interactions as though the teacher had “turned on the girls” and that was how the girls in question saw it. Seeing this rebuke and response alerted the observer to the different level of disciplinary rebuke and response of the boys and girls. Treating boys and girls as the same could lead to different responses by the two genders. Boys and girls, at least at the practical level of day-to-day engagement, wished or required or demanded (the verb is difficult and is the moot point here) to be treated differently.

6. Discussion

To reiterate, the principal focus of this article is not on the theoretical and empirical aspects of the gender-identity production but on the ability of the method to identify flashpoints as a means of capturing gender-production in flight and whether the method demonstrated any insight at all to the production of self-identity.

In three of the four episodes described above, we see the children making something of, co-creating, the situation. The teacher is not in total control but must respond to the gendered actions and initiatives of the children. It would seem that “boys will be boys” and “girls will be girls” in spite of, not because of the efforts of the teacher. In these episodes, both genders will take an opportunity to do gender work and assert their identity. The children seize upon a loose phrase; the dress of a girl provokes a comment; a boy triumphantly seizes a phrase from a bland textbook. They are not ciphers of gender reproduction but appear to swoop at the opportunity to make and assert their identity as boys and girls.

In the fourth example, we see how gender permeates all activity. By the harsh rebuke, are the girls being disciplined for not behaving like girls or was this simply gender equity, the girls being treated just like the boys? Here we have the same stimulus by the teacher but the boys and girls each interpret it differently. Gender-identity may be something of a co-production but gender precedes and permeates the activities of the children and teacher in the classroom. It would appear that the children are quite conventional in their ideas of gender.

The teacher in the episodes unwittingly introduces, colludes, and participates in the making of gender. At times this is clearly against their intentions. The teachers provided, at best, lukewarm tolerance of many gendered activities. Much could be made of the teachers being “better trained” with stock, approved, gender-neutral responses to the children’s initiatives. Given the eagerness of the children to make gender and to seemingly seize and wrought it out of the air, it is likely that this would be difficult. It might also be counterproductive. The school is not simply a place for abstract learning from detached teachers but a place where the teacher supports and engages the child, and the teacher must balance a variety of sometimes competing objectives in a given situation.

The children and the teachers do not have a regulatory regime imposed upon them, but they draw upon the conventional gender norms in order to make sense of a situation,

motivate each other or themselves, and act in the world. By the active participation of the children and the teacher, and drawing upon the available norms or “gender regime,” such a regime is reproduced.

Gender-identity production could be caught in flight, or in situ, using the idea of flashpoints. In these flashpoints, the observer’s attention is drawn to some hitherto unnoticed aspect and, reflexively, its significance is drawn out by virtue of the calling to attention. In this study, such flashpoints identified the making of gender-identity from an unnoticed backdrop and foregrounded it--making it prominent or salient in the situation.

Gender-identity, it will be recalled, was used as a proxy for self-identity. The making of gender is similar to (and intertwined with) the making of self. What we see in the accomplishment of gender for these children, we can also construe for the self. The children are in the process of making their selves out of the understandings, resources, and situations they are in. The self is constituted there, as is gender.

The article is not primarily about gender-identity or the self, but the method of their foregrounding. The aim was to describe and examine the utility or otherwise of the flashpoint as an ethnographic technique to help see the accomplishment of ourselves in daily and routine interaction. Flashpoints alone cannot provide this insight and other ethnographic methods, such as interviews, are necessary not only to fill out the background but to also sensitise the researcher to what might be going on.

To this end, the technique was successful and can be applied to other situations where the researcher wishes to disclose or highlight some example of our socially constructed world, particularly when the researcher wishes to focus on the process of production or enactment and make visible the commonplace. The use of the flashpoint provides a way to foreground and to glimpse the construction of our everyday in a social setting. It complements the Garfinkelian approaches where the researcher intervenes by breaching or otherwise manipulating common sense and everyday understandings (Davies, 1989; Garfinkel, 1967, 1990).

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