The observer observed, the researcher researched: 
The reflexive nature of phenomena

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Abstract:
This paper explores how one researcher, observing and video-recording young children in their natural everyday play situations, found some children also observing her. The preschool aged children tried to identify the relevant category to which she belonged, asking such questions as, 'Are you a mummy?' or 'Are you a teacher?' They also tried to establish the researcher's category by asking her to do certain things e.g. to arbitrate in their disputes. In addition, during some videoed sequences, they appear to orient to the researcher as observer, making her a player in their scene. This paper presents instances of young children observing the researcher while the researcher is observing (and video-recording) their play interactions. It uses video data obtained from these interactions to explicate through close scrutiny how and where their work of observing the researcher was visible. These understandings demonstrate the nature of reflexive phenomena, so that the activities of observation and being observed are realised as texts to be examined as much as the scenes that are videotaped.

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Introduction: The Nature of Reflexive Phenomena

Imagine two people walking down the hallway, and one calls out a greeting. According to the rules governing greeting exchanges, it is expected that the recipient of the greeting will return the greeting. This would follow the norm, rule, or maxim, of suitable conduct. The recipient of the initial greeting, however, may not return the greeting, because, for example, they did not hear, or, because they chose to ignore it. Then, any reference, account, or retelling of this event, would describe this deviation from the norm. In addition, regardless of whether the greeting is returned or not, the scene could not revert back to the original situation before the greeting was initiated. The act of proffering a greeting has reflexively transformed the situation for both parties.

While this example is used by Heritage (1984, pp. 106-110) to demonstrate how a greetings scene is constituted as a reflexive phenomena, the point is that any social scene can be 'reconstituted' (Heritage, 1984, p. 107). In other words, 'a reflexive universe of social action, simply put, is one where nobody is outside' (Giddens, 1997, p. 31). Any description of any social scene would have to account for any changed circumstance. This notion of constitutive reflexivity, founded by Garfinkel (1967), brings new understandings to perspectives of reflexivity in that reflexive phenomena is 'applied to actions' (Heritage, 1984, p. 110). Heritage (1984) explains,

It is precisely through the reflexive accountability of action that ordinary actors find themselves in a world of practical actions having the property that whatever they do will be intelligible and accountable as a sustaining of, or a development or violation, etc. of, some order of activity. Ê It is via the reflexive properties of actions that the participants Ê regardless of their degree of Ôinsight' into the matter Ê find themselves in a world whose characteristics they are visibly and describably engaged in producing and reproducing. (p. 110)

Naturalising Classroom Events and Naturalising Data

The problem with analysing interactions involving children is that what they do is so familiar to us, as adults. After all, we were all children once and we draw upon these memories of those experiences. Alternatively, as parents, we draw on our network of friends with children to try to understand, or confirm, what our children are doing. This is the rub: we typically and in a commonsense way draw upon these strategies for understanding children to describe the actions of a scene involving children. As a consequence, it is difficult to interpret the scene from the perspectives of the members, the children. The analyses in this paper do not claim to 'reveal the authentic child' (James, 1996, p. 315) by trying to understand or interpret the intentions of the members. Rather, by looking at the talk-in-interaction of the children, we can look at how the children put together their social order, turn by turn, to describe what some of
the practices of children can be like (cf. James, 1996; PerškylŠ, 1997).

Compare analysing an event involving children and analysing an event involving an alien and exotic culture. Woolgar (1988) would argue that the analysis of the exotic culture would be more accurate because 'exoticism acts as a buttress against reflexivity' (p. 27). Atkinson (1981) uses the same metaphor to describe this approach. He likens it to that of 'an anthropologist, confronted with a new, alien and exotic culture, force[d] to suspend one's own commonsense, culturally given assumptions.' This same procedure needs to be brought to analysis of children's cultures: a sense of the exotic. As Woolgar (1988) notes, we should try to recover and sustain the uncertainty which exists in the early stages of ethnographic enquiry, before our construction of text solidifies the concepts and categories we employ.É In short, we need continually to interrogate and find strange the process of representation as we engage in it. This kind of reflexivity is the ethnographer of the text. (pp. 28-29)

At the same time that the researcher is making sense of the work of the participants, they are working to make sense of us. As Herzfeld (1983) points out, 'the problem for ethnographers is to make sense of how their informants make sense of them. It is far easier to conceptualize informants as a source of information, and to forget informants' own intellectual curiosity about strangers' (p. 153). Woolgar (1988) asks, 'what are the implications of the observational work being done by the natives [the children] for own efforts at observation?' (p. 17). In this instance, this paper looks at the children's work of orienting to the researcher as observer, and making her a player in their scene. So, while the researcher is observing (and videorecording) the children's interactions, the children themselves are observing and categorising the work of the researcher.

In the editorial introduction (Fr¿nes, Jenks, Rizzini, & Stephens, 1997) of a recent issue of the journal Childhood, the editors point out that 'there is a necessity for a constant reflexive turn both in our methods of study and in the attention we pay to our growing body of knowledge' (p. 260). A failure to do otherwise 'can lead to a normalization of our topic and a routinization of our methodology and levels of understanding' (Fr¿nes, et al., 1997, p. 259). As observers of culture, we need to stress the importance of understanding the nature of reflexive phenomena, so that the act of observation is realised as a text to be examined as much as the scenes that they describe (Heritage, 1984; Woolgar, 1988). Such a suspension of commonsense assumptions allows for consideration of the data in new ways (Atkinson, 1981) and consequently for consideration of multiple readings of the data (Baker, 1997).

What this paper does through the use of classroom data analysed using conversation analysis principles is to challenge the naturalisms of
education (Baker, 1997) by unravelling the practices of children and researchers to open them up for discussion. This kind of analytic work resists a priori assumptions about research methodology and about our knowledge of childhood as a social construct. It affords the opportunity to tease out or explicate the data to see how children enact their everyday assumptions about the researcher in the classroom.

The Research Study

The site is a childcare centre located within an inner city area in Queensland, Australia. The centre offers 52 childcare places and caters for children aged from six weeks to approximately five years. This study has as its focus the children enrolled in the preschool room; the children are aged from three to five years.

The analyses presented in this paper draws upon two phases of data collection. The first phase, from March to October 1993, involved my initial interactions with the children and teaching staff as I established my data collection strategies. The second phase, which comprises the main data, entailed videorecording thirteen morning sessions of children's play during the first three weeks of the 1994 school year.

Phase 1: 1993 Observations and Interactions

As researcher, I observed children participating in their everyday free play as well as their everyday routines of group Show-and-Tell, music and story sessions. I also observed toileting routines and morning tea and lunch practices. In this preschool room, large chunks of the day are set aside for activities described as 'free play' (Bruce, 1991). In free play, a number of learning experiences, and activities and play materials are available from which the children self-select. Free play can occur inside the preschool room and could involve such activities as block play, collage, easel painting, or dramatic play. Free play can also occur in the outdoor playground, where choices include sand and water play, climbing and other gross motor activities. The teaching staff organise and oversee this environment and may participate in the activities of the children, but more often, attempt to extend children's learning through interactive questions and comments.

In this initial phase of observation, I used a participant observation approach (Corsaro, 1985; Mandell, 1991; Schwartzman, 1993; Spradley, 1980; Woods, 1986) in which I actively participated in the play of the children when invited. I was aware of initial impressions created by how I dressed (Woods, 1986), and so I wore casual clothes similar to the ones that the teaching staff wore. Both groups of participants, children and teachers, used initial encounters with me to make sense of my function within the classroom. It takes time for participants and researchers to observe and try to make sense of each other, and build a relationship of rapport and trust (Schwartzman, 1993; Woods, 1986).
Originally, I was highly influenced by the work of Woods (1986), and by the studies by Corsaro (1981, 1985) and Mandell (1991) of preschool-aged children's peer interactions in naturalistic settings. Corsaro and Mandell both participated with the children in their play: Mandell (1991) describes her role of being 'least-adult' and Corsaro (1981, 1985) describes his role as an active participant. They contend that perceived differences, even physical ones, can be minimised to allow participation with children. While an adult's size and the perceived power of adults can impose difficulties, they are seen as not insurmountable. Corsaro (1981) decided not to act like other adults in their interactions with children. Instead, he used a 'reactive strategy' (Corsaro, 1985, p. 28) to minimise his perceived power as an adult: He responded to the children rather than initiating contact with them. He 'never attempted (1) to initiate or terminate an episode; (2) to repair disrupted activity; (3) to settle disputes; (4) to coordinate or direct activity' (Corsaro, 1985, p. 32). Corsaro (1985) describes his success at being identified by the children as a peer, despite his age, size and adult status. For example, the children insisted that he sit with them and not on the periphery with the adults and parents at birthday celebrations. Mandell (1991) contended that in order for adults to understand children's play, they must always engage in joint meaning-making activities, particularly those involving the use of objects.

Initially, I played actively with the children when invited. For example, if children were engaged in dramatic play around hospitals and patients, I would pretend to be a patient if they invited me. I would also read stories to individual children who asked, or dig in the sand alongside a child in the sandpit when invited. However, by being actively involved in the children's activities, it was difficult to take more than the briefest notes and consequently I had to rely upon memory to record the happenings of the morning sessions. In so doing, I realised that I was missing much of the talk and action, being left with only my impressions of what occurred and without being able to review the original scenes.

I began to realise that my participation in children's play could effect adult-sanctioned style and content. Davies (1989) explains, 'because of the extent of unquestioned power that adults have over children, they can seriously impede children's agency or control of events' (p. 36). I felt that by participating in the play, even as a reactive participant, I influenced the talk. For instance, once I had been invited into the play, much of the talk generated by the children was directed towards me. It seemed that a researcher actively participating within the play of the children would have to account for their presence in any analysis.

As I wanted my presence to be as undistracting as possible, I gradually adopted the research role of observer (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988) or bystander (Davies, 1989), similar to that used by Davies (1989),
Goodwin (1990), Hatch (1987, 1988) and Opie (1994). These researchers minimised their interactions with children in naturalistic settings so that they were observers rather than participants. Davies (1989) notes, 'there is much that goes on between children that adults often do not know about and to which it is difficult for any researcher to gain access except as a non-participating by-stander' (p. 34). The role of observer meant that the researcher still responds to children's initiations, but that the responses are minimal and the researcher does not become physically involved in the children's play. This approach does not mean that the researchers assume that they are invisible to the children as indeed they are not. The researcher's presence can never be ignored within the scenes, but acknowledged (Hatch, 1997; Prout & James, 1990; Woods, 1986; Woolgar, 1988), as shown later in this paper.

**Phase 2: 1994 Videotaped Observations and Interactions**

Videorecordings of the children's free play sessions occurred in the first three weeks of 1994. The videocamera became an important piece of equipment for some children in the classroom. A few children would look through the viewfinder everyday. At other times, they would ask me why I had a camera. When I was videorecording, the children would ask me about what I could see, and I would tell them that I could see them, their playground, and so on. Many times, they would look through the viewfinder. Some particularly enjoyed the following game: One child would stand directly in front of the lens, dancing or making faces, and the other child would look through the viewfinder. Roles would then be switched. Only once was a child's interest in the camera intrusive: David wanted to look through the camera many, many times. Eventually, I told him that after his next look, he would have to wait for a while before he had another turn. Not satisfied, for the remainder of that day, he would flit past the camera or put objects in front of it.

The children and teachers appeared to take little notice of either the video camera or my presence after the first few days. At this time, the assistant teacher commented to me that the children 'took no notice of me.' However I cannot assume that my presence was not part of the scenes being filmed. In some data, my presence is noticed by the children and I analyse the transcript considering this observation. In other segments, the children do not appear to be aware, but I cannot discount my presence.

**Researcher Intervention: Dealing with Harmful Situations**

In my role of researcher, I needed to consider what to do when children were involved in what I considered dangerous behaviour. I took the same approach as Corsaro (1985); I intervened when I thought that a child was in physical danger. This happened several times. For instance, I intervened when Alan climbed up on top of a book case; another time I stepped in when Andrew picked up a large block and I thought that he
was going to hit another child with it. However, I did not mediate in instances of verbal assault.

When witnessing these episodes that could be described as violent and threatening, I decided not to intervene, but to allow the talk and action to continue, and I continued to videorecord it. In these instances, I believe that I was able to capture some of the talk and action to which adults typically do not have access. I let the scenes unfold in front of me without intervening as most teachers and adults would do. Fine (in Fine & Sandstrom, 1988) faced a similar dilemma when he witnessed a stealing offence. He realised that if he publicly called attention to these actions, the behaviour would probably not stop and he would have been excluded from observing these types of behaviours again. What the children made of this is interesting to consider. As I did not intervene in the play to stop conflict, the children observed an adult who was not acting in the 'natural' category (Atkinson, 1980) of adult.

Establishing the Researcher's Category

Corsaro (1985), Mandell (1991), Opie (1994) and James (1996), in their respective studies, found that the children tried to identify the category to which the researchers belonged. This occurred throughout my study as well, and the questions seemed to appear more frequently as my role changed from participant to by-stander. I was very much a visitor in their space, and it seemed that they could more easily identify a category for me when I played with them. It was made more difficult when I adopted a bystander approach. The children would ask me, 'Are you a mummy?' or 'Are you a teacher?' to try and find a relevant category for me. When they would ask, I would tell them that I was not a mummy or a teacher but that I was observing what they were doing. I have categorised a number of roles that the children identified based on my presence in the classroom.

Researcher as Mother Figure

The work of an early childhood teacher is often seen as complementing the work of the mother (Walkerdine, 1987). One example illustrating this categorisation was when Portia asked me to get a tissue for another child. I suggested that she do it herself.

Researcher as Interested Listener

My responses to the children mostly affirmed their initiation. For example, questions would be answered but conversations would not be initiated. The following example illustrates Amelia's attempt to include me into her talk: I observed Amelia making a 'cake' with sand in the sand pit area. Several times, she told me what she was doing. When I first did not verbally respond, her comments became louder and more urgent. When I finally acknowledged that she was making a cake,
she continued with her play, satisfied.

**Researcher as Possible Disciplinarian**

One event early in this initial phase of observation particularly stands out. Tony picked up a block to throw at a block building he had constructed, then saw me watching him. He stopped, block in hand behind his head, paused, and then very deliberately threw the block while watching me. I made no physical or verbal response. He then turned back to the block building and continued to throw blocks at it. In this example, my non-reaction may have been part of what Tony worked with, so I cannot say that my presence did not count.

Children would ask me to arbitrate in their disputes about entry into a play situation or about an object of play. When asked, I would refer them to the teacher. I did not realise the extent of the children's acceptance of my role of bystander established in the earlier phase of the research project until Belinda started in the classroom at the beginning of the 1994 school year. In disputes with other children, she would constantly call upon me for arbitration. Her expectation that I would fulfil an 'adult policing role' (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988, p. 44) contrasted strongly with the other children's apparent acceptance of my role as minimal participant.

**Researcher as Pawn**

This example is illustrated by looking at how one child used the researcher as a way to re-enter block area after having been recently evicted by the other boys from that area. Block area is a carpeted area surrounded by shelves housing large wooden blocks that the children use to build roads and buildings. John has recently been chased out of this area by older boys who used threats of physical violence. On John's departure, the remaining boys argued about another child's presence in block area. When the teacher entered the scene to arbitrate the conflict, John quietly re-entered block area, along with the teacher. As the teacher tried to find out what was happening, John started to talk to the researcher. It is here that John's accomplishment is seen to get underway, and it appears to go unrecognised by the other participants of this episode at this time.

At the same time that Andrew is talking to the teacher, John quietly engages the researcher in a parallel conversation (turns 63-65) about Megan, a child visiting from the 2-3 year old classroom. As two conversations are happening at the same time, I have provided them in parallel.
62 Andrew ((to teacher)) [YEAH* (.) AND HE AND HE W- WANTS TO BUILD SOMETHING (.) A- A- AND HE DAVID WON'T LET HIM BUILD WITH US ((reaches towards teacher and brushes David's arm))

63 John ((to researcher)) ¡What's her name?¡ ((referring to a girl who has just walked into block area))

64 Researcher I don't know

65 John what's your name (mean) ((to girl)) I won't ask her ((to researcher)) ((John starts to pick his nose))

John has used the arrival of the teacher and his conversation with the researcher to effect a safe return to block area. For John, the teacher's entry was a useful decoy to allow him to return to block area seemingly undetected or unchallenged by the other boys who had so recently evicted him from this area. In this instance, the presence of the researcher and the following conversation initiated by John provided him with a legitimate reason for being in block area. After the teacher left, John stayed in this area. John had strategically and pragmatically used the arrival of the teacher and the presence of the researcher to effect his safe return to the block area. John has used the presence of the teacher and the researcher to advance his own position, to re-enter the play space of block area.

**Researcher as a Silent Overhearing Audience**

This role involves being a 'silent overhearing audience' (Heritage, 1985). Being an overhearing audience is where the participants' talk occurs so that the participants are not only aware that their talk and action are being overheard by the researcher, but that the presence of the researcher becomes part of the scene. In this sense, the researcher is both a silent member of the audience and also a player, in the same scene. This orientation to the scene becomes somehow critical to the children's interactions and events that are being constructed. As the researcher's presence (even while silent) is part of the talk and interaction, the researcher is constructed as a co-participant (Goodwin, 1995; Jacoby & Ochs, 1995). This role was not initially apparent but was found upon detailed and close examination of the transcripts. The following two extracts illustrate this particular orientation to the researcher.

Extract 1 shows the role of silent overhearing audience (Heritage, 1985) with the researcher's presence becoming a critical aspect of the game. This episode begins with two children, Portia and Amelia, sitting at a drawing table. A third child, John, sits down, saying something (that cannot be heard on the videotape) that inflames the girls to respond.
1 John ( )

2 Amelia ((to Portia)) You know (1.0) you know

3 Portia You don't say Ah-ah-our DRAWINGS a SCRIBBLE.

The performance begins when Amelia and Portia launch into a game of pretence, imagining and naming all the possible things they could do to John. Portia's talk and action particularly enacted with a sense of display for an audience. As researcher, I overhear their performance, and the teacher and another child sitting at a nearby table are also within earshot. The initial interactions of this episode show how the girls are oriented to the presence of the researcher from the very beginning of the scene (turns 5 and 9).

4 Amelia You know? ((to Portia)) ( ) (2.0)

5 Portia ((to Amelia)) I don't know how to play this game ((in a playful squeaky voice, looks sideways briefly at researcher))

6 Researcher Ahh

7 Amelia because (you do so) ((Amelia glances at John and then leans close to Portia, talking to her while continuing to draw.))

8 Portia ((Portia laughs in a high pitched squeal.))

9 Amelia ((Amelia looks up at the researcher, then speaks quietly to Portia)) We're going to ( ) we're going to policeman to get John.

10 Portia ((to Amelia)) We're going to ( ) John in in jail

16 Portia We can scrub it all off soap and daddy we can scrub it all off, see?

17 John (3.0) Are you my ( ) maybe I will get the teacher

18 Amelia You know ((looks at John)) my dad will take you to th- to the hospital ((Amelia and Portia laugh; they both look at each other and then at the researcher))

The game continues as the girls tease John with threats of jails, hospitals, parents and policeman. John threatens to call in the teacher (turn 17), and he does later in the episode, but the teacher does not afford him the support that he is seeking. The girls then take their game to the teacher, displaying to her the same elements of pretend threats that they had displayed to me. The teacher also does not intervene in their game and the final outcome is that John leaves the drawing table.

It is impossible to say what the game may have been like without my presence; I can only comment on what actually happened in this episode.
What is interesting is how Portia and Amelia use the presence of the researcher to display their game, which they do with a great sense of display and performance (Sawyer, 1997). Their awareness of my presence is evident by the number of times that they glance at me (turns 5, 9, and 18) showing my presence as an important aspect of their performance.

Extract 2 also shows the researcher's role as that of a silent overhearing audience. In this extract, one boy ascribes a moral category of being 'naughty' to another boy. It seems that it is not a coincidence that this type of talk occurs in my presence. This episode takes place in the block area. Three boys (Matt, Andrew, and Alan) have just chased David from this area because David would not Alan play in block area with them. In order to chase David from the area, they used a series of verbal threats of bashing and actual physical violence. David's final action before he leaves block area is to hold a large wooden block threateningly over the videocamera (turn 117).

115 David [I be* ( ) (exactly) in a minute ((raises the block above the video camera and slowly brings the block down over the camera))]

116 (3.0)

117 Res'er ((¡arhh let's put the blocks down¡))

118 ((David puts down the block and leaves block area.))

David's movements are very slow and controlled, unlike his previous actions. After a three second pause, I tell David to put down the block (turn 117). He does (turn 118). After David leaves the area, there is a period where there seems a lack of direction as to where the three remaining boys go from here. Matt announces that he is going to rebuild, and he does (turn 121). Andrew points out the physical strength of this group of boys who have ousted David (turn 119). Alan, in my hearing, comments on 'he' (presumably David) being a 'naughty boy' (turn 120).

119 Andrew ((to Matt)) We're very strong aren't we Matt?

120 Alan yeah A we -and and he's a naughty (.) boy isn't he? Yeah

121 Matt I'm building this thing up again ((Matt is rebuilding the construction. John sits nearby, watching.))

This comment by Alan could be designed for my hearing. It does not seem coincidental that Alan's reference to David came after David lifted a block over the video camera. In a sense, I am now in a similar category to those boys who supported Alan's entry into block area. By cautioning David, I could be seen to be aligned with those boys already aligned against him. It seems that some of this talk may be for my benefit, as
I am the silent overhearing audience (Heritage, 1985).

Alan's description of David being a 'naughty boy' supplies a moral category for the boys and for me to account for David and for what has just happened (Jayyusi, 1984; 1991). Jayyusi (1984) points out that 'examining the ways in which persons are described and the ways in which such descriptions are used to accomplish various practical tasks É it becomes clear that categorization work is embedded in a moral order' (p. 2). What are the implications for selecting this category to describe David in my hearing?

Understanding the context within which this categorisation was made is necessary in order to understand the value embedded by the participants (Jayyusi, 1984). Alan proposes the category of 'being naughty' within the context of having nearby an adult who is a silent observer and recorder of the event. A verbal justification, which I can hear, of the boys' previous actions of ousting David is given by Alan. This explanation is couched in a language which children know that adults use to judge children: the categories of being good or naughty. In a sense, Alan could be described as interpreting and naming the event for me and for the boys in block area.

Conclusion

My non-reaction to the talk and actions of the children in the preschool classroom enabled me eventually to observe daily normalised interactions to which teachers and other adults may not have had access because of their perceived power and control. But it would be impossible to say that my presence did not count in that classroom. As these examples illustrate, the children categorised my role in a number of ways. Even as a bystander, I was made a co-constructor of the interaction. The researcher's presence can never be discounted. The researcher becomes 'part of the picture' (Woolgar, 1988, p. 16) and cannot be distanced from the world that is being studied or escape as the researcher is part of it (Hatch, 1997; Prout & James, 1990; Woolgar, 1988).

References


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