Purdy, L., Jones, R. L. (2013). Changing personas and evolving identities: the contestation and renegotiation of researcher roles in fieldwork. *Sport, Education and Society, 18*, 292-310.

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Changing personas and evolving identities:

The contestation and re-negotiation of researcher roles in field work

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss the development and evolution of particular personas adopted by researchers in the quest for rich exchanges within the social field. It analyzes my role (the principal author) as a female ethnographer (and the sole female) in the world of elite male rowing. Data are drawn from personal notes, reflections and observations during a five-month long training camp. My experiences are located within dramaturgical social theory and, in particular, Goffman's work on face and impression management. The significance of the work is two fold. Firstly, it lies in recognising the strategies we use and the identities we construct as researchers in negotiating the social field toward desired ends. Secondly, it raises awareness of the implications performances have for the nature of the data gathered and the conclusions drawn from them.

Keywords: researcher roles, Goffman, ethnography, rowing

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Introduction

Despite rhetoric alluding to the constructivist nature of social study, an in-depth examination of the researcher's role within it continues to be somewhat overlooked (Howarth, 2002). This is not so much in respect of acknowledging the researcher as an active participant in the construction of such work or even engaging in an element of sociological reflexivity, but of the actual roles adopted by and demanded of actors in their quest to gather data. Indeed, far from being an unproblematic process, the data gathering function is often compromised not only by epistemological beliefs, but also by the real constraints and opportunities of human interaction (Nash and Wintrob, 1972). As Castellano (2007, 705) reminds us, simply "'observing what people do' belies the deeply complex process of crafting the role of researcher in relation to the people and places under study". This neglect of researchers' social 'performances' allied to the disciplinary requirement for what Blackman (2007) termed 'clean narratives', has often led to a somewhat sanitised version of events where declared interpretive work more nearly resembles quasi-realist accounts. Despite claims to the contrary, events are reported from the perspective of 'being there'; placing the researcher as a largely objective recorder of events as occurred. The result has been a tendency towards author evacuated texts where the researcher, although acknowledged as an architect of the findings, is essentially hidden (Howarth, 2002). Here then, a simple recourse to reflexivity, often defined as a researcher's engagement with his or her social positioning and a "challenge to common sense worlds" (Gray, 2008: 936), is not enough. Rather, as Gray (2008) reminds us, such action, if engaged in, does not simply set the researcher apart from the work carried out; just because reflexivity is claimed does not mean an abdication of author influence. Indeed, as Findlay (2002: 212) states "when it comes to practice, the process of engaging in reflexivity is full of muddy ambiguity and multiple [problematic] trails". Similarly, little discussion related to the evolution of researcher roles often dictated by concrete context (inclusive of reflexive claims), or the ethics associated with adopting varied personas towards desired ends, are embarked upon. Therefore, in agreement with Ortiz (2005), we believe that "if we

are to better understand those we are studying from their point of view, and to understand ourselves as

fieldworkers, we should be concerned with more than our research findings" (p.282). This means that we

should better take into account how we gather data and, in particular, the dynamic roles we play as researchers

to ensure access and acceptance into the field. This article examines the evolution of my (the principal

author's) role as a researcher during the data collection process in an ethnographic field project. It explores

the identity mutations I experienced in the quest for desired information; "the backstage reality of research

life" (Grace, 1998: 204) – principally the difficulties experienced with access, ethics and changes of direction

within the wider project. Whilst taking heed of the general literature associated with reflexivity, the paper is

more concerned with concrete reactions to ever changing research relationships and context; what Reinharz

(1997) referred to as situationally created selves in the field.

The significance of the work is rooted in exploring how the roles we adopt as field researchers are

constantly re-negotiated in context, and the implications of doing so for the subsequent data. The value of the

study also relates to highlighting the interpersonal dimension of field research by acknowledging that such

work is not only unavoidably partial, but is situated in the relationships within which it is constructed (Adams,

1999). According to Adams (1999), such relationships can even be viewed as exploitative, locating the data

gathering or assembling process as a socially organised practice. Data then are considered constructed both

through the biographical and ontological lenses of researchers, and the contextual power-minded

performances of such researchers. Relatedly, my interest lies not only in discerning the actions and utterances

of those being observed, but in the roles played by researchers to access what they perceive to be 'places of

interest'. In this respect, the purpose of the work pertains to investigating aspects of what Blackman (2007)

recently described as 'hidden ethnography', thus better addressing fieldwork problems related to 'how to be'

in the field (Castellano 2007: 705).

In terms of the paper's structure, following a discussion of the dramaturgical framework through which

my reflexive considerations are examined, a section outlining the research setting and methods is presented. This is followed by a structured analysis of the data centered on the negotiation of the roles I adopted to enter the field and their evolution as the work progressed. Throughout the discussion I reflect on my adopted roles and question the implications for the data collected and the conclusions drawn from them.

A framework for analysis

In response to calls from post-modern qualitative researchers concerned with discursive dichotomies of power which operate as hidden mechanisms of control, ethnography has been reconceptualised as a critical enterprise where social life does not just exist to be studied in an 'antiseptic', objective way. Such a perspective refers to what Wacquant (2004) termed 'carnal sociology', calling for total immersion in the field. In doing so, it has problematised the relationship between researcher and those being studied, particularly in respect of the power relationships inherent in field-work and the ethical concerns related to the data gathered (Adams, 1999). Such work, however, is not without its shortcomings. Criticisms here surround over-familiarity and intimacy (including sexual relations) with informants (Goode, 2002) from a predominantly ethical viewpoint. Additionally, on a more general plane, Irwin (2006) has argued that the perspective has generally failed to meaningfully analyze how researchers' actions reinforce or resist the aforementioned field-located power dimensions, thus directly contributing to the reality constructed.

Some researchers, such as Shaffir (1999), have argued that ethnographic research, by its very nature, requires role-playing and acting; that is, a degree of dramaturgical awareness as opposed to the ever present dramaturgical principle. Indeed, requiring permission from others to carry out their work, participant observation researchers can be seen as being constantly involved in a form of 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959) with those they wish to observe to help them secure their desired position. Such impression

management, which is examined in more depth later, is aimed at producing recognisable and convincing performances for others (Williams, 1998) while creating an idealised version of the self. The strategies employed are invented and modified in response to the oral and gestural patterns within the interaction (Sarbin, 1995). This, of course, is not to totally decry such actions as being the result of constant and conscious underhand scheming. Rather, that by engaging in such performances or roles, individuals commit themselves to the wider social order, ensuring that social relationships work (Branaman, 1997).

One of the most obvious roles undertaken on a daily basis is gender; that is, the different role expectations on men and women who live in that culture. Certainly, a researcher cannot escape the implications of gender, as no position of genderless neutrality can be achieved (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). In tying the work of Goffman to a gendered 'order', Shilling and Bunsell (2009: 142) concluded that although such gendered interaction "does not physically compel men and women to present themselves in particular ways…disrespecting this order can have serious consequences". Strong incentives then exist to conform. In response, some researchers, such as Bujra, (1975) and Gregory (1984) have suggested that female ethnographers adopt a pseudo-male role when collecting information from and about men. This does not mean that the female ethnographer behaves 'like a male', rather, as Gregory (1984) attests, the ethnographer is simply operating within the male 'realm'. That is, she participates in and observes 'male' activities, works regularly with male informants, takes an active interest in "things of the male world" and associates with men in the pursuit of those interests (Gregory, 1984: 322). Consequently, some female ethnographers have analyzed the advantages and disadvantages of cross-gender fieldwork in male dominated settings (Daniels, 1967; Easterday, Papademas, Schorr & Valentine, 1977; Gurney, 1985; Warren & Rasmussen, 1977; De Andrade, 2000; Naples, 1996; Sherif, 2001), while others have investigated researchers' sexual and emotional immersion in the field (see Irwin [2006] for a fuller account here). What makes such investigations different is that the intimate field encounter is the central topic of investigation (Irwin 2006). Irwin's work appears

particularly insightful in this regard, as it also explores the ethical dilemmas faced by researchers as they settle into ethnographic intimacy. Despite such developments, with the possible exception of Adams's (1999) study, little discussion has taken place on how the female researcher explicitly negotiates her place in the male setting and constantly evolves her identity to meet perceived contextual demands.

Traditional role theorists have taken a structural approach to determine the features and workings of social roles (e.g., role playing). Here, according to Carron (1988), the role of the researcher is considered to derive from an expectation of behaviour. That is, people assume their role, in that they engage in a set of behaviours that they perceive to fulfill that role (Mack & Gammage, 1998). These behaviours are rendered understandable or meaningful to themselves and to other group members (Mack & Gammage, 1998). Interactionists, on the other hand, have focused on individuals' creative independence (e.g., role making), thus giving greater credence to agency in dictating action (Raffel, 1999). Meanwhile, other researchers, for example: Handel, (1979), Heiss (1981) and Stryker and Statham (1985), have called for theoretical convergence of these perspectives arguing that roles are constructed as a result of the dual impact of structure and agency. That is, an individual's behaviour is comprised both of unconstrained decision making (agency) as well as being influenced by wider social factors (structures) (Coakley, 2006). In recognition of the influence of structure and agency on role construction, Callero (1994) examined roles from a 'resource perspective' placing them as cultural objects. Here, roles were viewed less as positions than as resources which could grant access to other types of resources such as social and material capital. The "key point is that these forms of capital are only accessible *through* roles", making roles a "vehicle for agency" (Callero, 1994: 230).

In the twentieth century, role theory largely developed through a comparison between social life and the theatre (Gouws, 1995). For example, Goffman (1959) employed a dramaturgical approach suggesting that in everyday life individuals "play roles, negotiate situations and to a certain extent are forced to be 'actors'"

(Marsh, Keating, Eyre, Campbell & McKenzie, 1996: 73). Here, the nature of interaction is viewed as being shaped by both the environment, audience and individuals' agency within such confines (Goffman, 1959). That is, within social situations, people rely upon an (idealized) front, which is also consistent with the norms, mores, and laws of society (Goffman, 1959). Conversely, information dealing with aberrant behaviour and belief is concealed from the audience, which makes prominent those socially sanctioned characteristics. This legitimizes both a person's social role and the framework to which the role belongs (Goffman, 1959). With an individual choosing what the audience will see, that which is suppressed is left in the back region (Goffman, 1959). The backstage is private with access to certain behaviours being controlled to prevent outsiders seeing a performance that is not intended for them (Marsh et al., 1996). It is a place where illusions and impressions are constructed, where the performer can somewhat relax and step out of character, knowing that no member of the audience will intrude (Goffman, 1959). As previously mentioned, Goffman termed such action 'impression management' (for example, a "student nodding her head to reveal otherwise unapparent attentiveness" [Branaman, 1997: lii]), where individuals construct a desired image of themselves for audience consumption. According to Goffman then, in our social encounters we present impressions in an attempt to control how others see us; actions which entail the selection of the appropriate role for the situation we find ourselves in from the repertoire we have available (Smith, 2006).

Taking the dramaturgical metaphor as an antecedent, Brissett and Edgley (2006) discussed the associated sensitizing lens of appropriate expression. Although they agree with Goffman that dramaturgy is interested in 'social acts' (p.2), they diverge slightly from his later works (e.g., *Frame analysis* [1974]) in giving greater credence to agential expression; that "humans, by virtue of their expressiveness, are empowered to negotiate their meanings in situations with similarly empowered others" (p.3). Nevertheless, the dramaturgical insight is still viewed as both individualizing and socializing, as personal expressiveness requires association with others (Goffman, 1967). In this respect, it is able to transform a polarizing either-or

explanation making the language of dramaturgy relational (Zicklin 1968).

An important distinction to be made is that between the dramaturgical principle itself, which has been described as a cultural universal, and personal awareness of it. An awareness of dramaturgy certainly holds the potential to better organise experience and present oneself in a favourable light, in addition to manipulation and deceit. However, although some actors become very aware of behavioural strategies, this awareness is not essential to an understanding and recognition of dramaturgy (Brissett & Edgley, 2006). Criticisms of Goffman's impression management as a sociology of fraud then (Gouldner, 1970), can be criticized themselves. This is because intentions may be noble, making any judgment of action as insincere or bogus, non-contextual. Similarly, the fact that people have many selves makes any notion of a definitive inauthentic self very doubtful (Edgley, 2003). Although the focus of such dramaturgy is both discursive and non-discursive communication, its essence remains social rather than cognitive or intentional. Goffman (1959: 243) dealt with, or dismissed, the apparent dialectic between morality and performance by asserting that the dilemma actually lay in the "amoral issue of engineering [the most] convincing impression". Similarly, according to Brissett and Edgley (2006), as individuals we 'are condemned to expression', and it is precisely with the repercussions of this condemnation that dramaturgy is concerned. Dramaturgy then comprises a considerable development of traditional role theory. As Edgley (2003: 154) states, although "we come to know ourselves in roles, the relationship between the actor and the roles he or she plays is considerably more complicated" than portrayed in conventional, structural representations of role; that is, an unquestioning fulfilling of given expectations. Alternatively, a dramaturgical perspective stresses the nature of existence as an on-going struggle, "never fully resolved and always teetering on the brink of chaos" (p.154).

Setting, sample and method

The aim of the wider ethnographic project was to explore the factors which enabled and constrained the development of a working climate (i.e. the environment that is created through the interaction between coaches, athletes and administrators) in an elite men's rowing programme. This necessitated spending an extended period of time with the group which comprised the social world under study, observing what took place, listening to what was said, asking questions and participating (Partington, 2001). Such an approach, in line with Lincoln and Guba (2003) among others, placed me as the prime instrument of research where my observational skills, ability to interact with the participants and interpretive clarity would shape the study.

The study was set within an off-season training programme to which only an elite band of ten rowers and five coaches (all male) were invited. At the end of the five month programme, the final selection trials for the upcoming international racing season would be held. The research included observing and being part of between one and three training sessions per day, attending meetings between the coaches, informal athlete gatherings, as well as more structured meetings with both coaches and athletes. I also served as coxswain[3] when the athletes trained in the eight (a boat comprising eight rowers). I also observed the athletes' sessions with the sport psychologist and bio-mechanists and was present at all regattas attended by the crew. I hoped that immersing myself in the programme was a way to "subject [my]self … to their life circumstances …to be close to them while they respond[ed] to what life [did] to them" (Goffman, 1989, 125).

Whilst 'shadowing' the participants, I kept an extensive written record of my observations which included running descriptions of settings, environments, events, and the behaviours and conversations among and with the prime actors. In line with Lofland's (2004) dictum, I treated these field notes as my raison d'être. I tried to be as concrete as possible, attempting "to stay at the lowest level of inference" (p. 233). In line with the interpretive nature of the work, as opposed to collecting 'facts', the field notes served to re-conceive and elaborate on what was being learned; a means to "rethink, undo, and shape the ongoing research process and

products" (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997: 18). In addition to recording observations, I also kept a personal record of my insights, concerns and ideas related to 'how things seem to work around here', which helped to locate and ground meaning (Ely et al., 1997). The record or log also served to assemble background as well as "laying a foundation for possible lines of analysis and interpretation" (Lofland, 2004: 234). My field-notes then, were not limited to what I observed; they were also for recording 'me'; my thoughts, perceptions and emotions in my researcher role as the field-work progressed. As with the field observations, I reviewed these notes intensely and frequently (sometimes nightly), reflecting on and rationalising my behaviours; scrutinizing for 'accuracy' of interpretation. These reflections were subsequently shared with the co-author in critical discussions; encouraging consideration of how my subjectivity was both a producer and a product of the text (Richardson 2000). My goal here was to develop a reflexive sociology; one that explored the relationship between roles played and the person who played them.

Discussion

Negotiating the field

A fundamental component of successful fieldwork is related to gaining access and establishing rapport with potential informants (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Mazzei & O'Brien, 2009). The processes of gaining access to research sites and of building relationships with site members are often made more complicated when entering 'restrictive' contexts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Van Maanen, 1988; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Given the high stakes surrounding elite sport, it is not surprising that an 'outsider's' access to high performance training programmes is problematic. Consequently, to access my chosen context (i.e., an elite men's rowing programme), an embargo relating to the publication of data had to be negotiated before the study could commence. This provided the participants with security that their contribution to the project would not have an effect on their future involvement in the rowing programme.

In light of the restrictive context, I believed that the development and maintenance of a trusting relationship with the participants was crucial to the study. Obviously this was strongly related to how I 'played' my allotted researcher role. My initial thoughts here were guided by a perceived need to adopt a position of 'neutrality' (Johnson, 1995). I was at pains to emphasize throughout the first week of fieldwork that I was not there to judge, just to record and try to understand what the various parties that constructed the context 'held true' (Murray, 2003). I wasn't a spy', I just wanted their experiences (Raeger, 2005). Through constantly reiterating this position, I began to construct a front to provide the participants with impressions that were consonant with my desired goals; that I could fit in, be non-judgmental and supportive of the programme in general and the people within it (Goffman, 1959).

Journal entry

Robert (a coach) tested me today. He told the rowers that it was time to get Sean (another rower) out of contention for selection. He looked straight at me when he made the comment. I'm sure it was to see my reaction. Although I thought the comment was unfair, I put on a smile, a mask and nodded with the rest of the group, making it look like I agreed with him. My reaction indicated that I was on 'his side', so I think I passed the test.

In providing such a response I relied upon a 'front' (Goffman 1959) to manipulate Robert's impression of me. It was a front which suppressed my natural response of questioning the coach, which, if did, could have well created barriers between myself and the participants. Not being able to get sufficiently close to participants and their activities to understand what they were up to from their vantage point (Lofland et al., 2006) would defeat the purpose of the project. I alternatively gave the impression that the coach's remark didn't bother me. I apparently passed the test (and many similar others), as the rowers and coaches became increasingly accepting of my presence. Such behaviour is consistent with the notion that people create and present roles they feel to be situationally necessary (Jones et al., 2004). In this case, I was aware that the

success of my research would partly depend on the degree to which I could build personal and trusting relationships with the informants; a consideration which overrode other personal concerns (Coffey, 1999; Declercq, 2000). In this respect, my researcher self had come to play a dominant role.

As I spent the first few weeks of fieldwork trying to define my place in the context, the participants were doing the same. I was constantly asked "are you going to put that in your study?" or "how are you going to write up this bullshit". Certainly, such comments suggested the participants felt they could contribute to the study as well as a chance for me to recognise what events were being viewed as significant. By doing so, my field work role was being negotiated, with both the coaches and athletes tending to assign me a position and providing me with information which they considered appropriate within the unfolding social order (Warren, 1988). Without becoming acutely conscious, my dramaturgical persona consisted of just smiling a lot, chuckling along with the banter as any newcomer would do, whilst being openly grateful of the seeming acceptance.

Becoming a 'field' daughter

Within even the most pre-existent assumed role, there comes a time when the researcher must personalise it and let his or her self emerge (Adler & Adler, 1998). My previous experience as a female in men's rowing programmes had taught me that 'blending in' with the crew resulted in being accepted and 'liked' as opposed to 'standing out' and drawing attention to myself; it was a productive strategy for granting access. Consequently, I decked myself in the athletes' off-water uniform; cap, and rain suit. Having been a coxswain, this had also been, and to an extent still was, my 'uniform' of choice, so it wasn't a great step to take. Actively decreasing my femininity and not 'standing out' seemed to put both the participants and me at ease. As I became more comfortable in the setting and my place within the group, I began to evolve from the marginally involved, somewhat withdrawn role of the traditional participant observer (Adler and Adler 1987).

I began to create a position which better represented myself in the context; that of the enthusiastic, ever helpful assistant somewhat akin to Warren's (2001) 'dancing daughter'. The 'dancing daughter' is bright and active, young and smiling. She dances to seek approval and acceptance from her 'field father' who grants her access and longevity in the setting (Warren 2001). I also coxed a few sessions; a role which positioned me both as an intimate researcher and athlete. The former allowed me close access to the rowers, while the second gave the coaches a perception of power over me as I was now subject to their guidance and instruction.

Although not a deliberately engineered strategy, I was certainly aware that I wanted to and was moving in from the periphery of the research context in the search for more personal access. I wanted the coaches to see me as supportive, someone they could confide in, someone who could keep a secret. Hence, I helped clean up the boathouse, sorted the clothing left after rows, baked cookies, washed the dishes in the clubhouse, made cups of tea, tidied the weights room and kept the coaches company in the launches. I made myself useful, constantly dashing around, yet always cheerful, in response to others' requests (Warren, 2001). Nothing was too much trouble or bother. In this respect, despite efforts to de-emphasise my femininity through changing dress, I was simultaneously re-affirming gender through domesticated action. Rather than viewing my behaviour as either 'doing or not doing' gender, my role seemed more related to Adams' (1999) notion of a 'mascot researcher'. However, different from Warren (1988), I didn't feel that adopting this persona was a desperate resort to gain control over my research through twisting a feminist identity. It was just a cautious approach which seemed to yield positive results; like Adams (1999: 340) it seemed "a reasonable way to deal with problems of access, rapport and reciprocity".

The nature of the research exchange was cultivated further when I volunteered for activities outside the programme. For example, between sessions, when the rowers were resting, I began to assist with a local school rowing programme, which, coincidently, was co-ordinated by the coach of the elite female rowers. On

occasions, while the coaches were in meetings, I entertained some of their children, becoming a trusted member of their wider families. Through such actions, over time, I was able to win the approval and trust of the coaches, my metaphoric 'field-fathers' (Warren, 2001). This endorsement was evidenced as the coaches increasingly involved me in tasks and granted favours that were initially not approved. These included contributing to discussions and decisions about the training programme, and being provided with rowing gear and expenses. Although on reflection, the 'helpful' role was a performance, it was far from being an insincere portrayal. Indeed, this is where a more insightful reading of Goffman (1959) helps in dealing with the apparent dichotomy between self and role. Accepting that a divide exists between them, Goffman declared that self-as-performer and self-as-character are both nevertheless social constructions, contingent upon context (Branaman, 2000) Thus, according to Goffman, social identity prevails (Walsh-Bowers, 2006). So it was with my sincere morphing into a cheery, busy, ever-helpful 'dancing daughter' (Warren, 2001). Not only was it way to secure data, but also a means to gain acceptance into a new social group at a basic level. Consequently, as the coaches became more relaxed around me, they began to open up about the difficulties of balancing family life and coaching, and the additional pressures of being high performance coaches.

A sister to my field 'brothers'

Whilst I became a 'daughter' to the coaches, it was another matter with the athletes. Although I had adopted the same initial persona with them as I did with the coaches, their resultant gaze was different. Indeed, being a quasi-athlete of the same age range, sharing similar tastes in music, movies and humour, the relationships developed along more horizontal than vertical lines. I become less of a researcher to them and more of a sister. Although this role adoption took place somewhat synonymously with being a 'daughter' to the coaches, it began later and developed at a slower rate. I found out that my initial attachment to the coaches hindered a closer relationship with the rowers; hence I became conscious of the need to invest quite heavily in

establishing relationships with them. I couldn't be perceived as being too close to the coaches, yet refused to give the athletes any insight into the coaches' thoughts and discussions. It was an attempt to maintain by authenticity both as a researcher and a person. This sister role, however, was again a negotiated one, largely dictated by the rowers (Warren, 1988). What appeared to remain constant though was the 'mascot' role; it was a way for the athletes to make increasing sense of my presence as I continued with the bright, cheery persona. As a growing sign of acceptance, I was soon included in and contributed to frequent contextual banter. Even though most of the jibes were at my expense I took it as a sign of recognition and approval; that we had a shared history and identity.

Journal entry

Alex, Gordon, JP and Matthew have discovered that by calling me 'ginga' [a person with red hair], they can wind me up. I've been able to evade their slagging until this week. Given that I responded to their banter they won't stop teasing me and have been celebrating that they have finally found my weak point!

Similarly, the evolving relationship gave me the right to joke as well as the authority to get away with the joke (Fine and de Soucey 2005).

Journal entry

Jake was parading around in a towel today - nothing else, just a towel. As he walked by me he commented, "you know you're impressed!" I quickly retorted, "I'm sorry, I can't see anything, where's my magnifying glass?" The coaches and athletes howled with laughter.

Walker and Goodson (1977) reinforce the performative dynamics of humour and the relevance of interpersonal relationships,

The nature of humour is complex because it resides not only in the logic and content of what is said, but in the performance of the teller, in the relationship between the teller and the audience, and in the immediate context of the instance (p. 212).

I laughed at the athletes' comical take and mimic of the coaches (although not too much) thus becoming somewhat complicit in the subversive act. Doing so added to my credibility as 'one of them', someone 'at their level', someone they could trust (Scott, 1996). On reflection, my acceptance seemed somewhat inevitable as my 'front stage' performance had been founded on being jovial, helpful and generally optimistic. Thus, my outsider status decreased as I gradually won the approval of my 'field brothers' which not only made the fieldwork more enjoyable but also further secured access to potentially sensitive areas in subsequent conversations and situations. Hence, I didn't feel the marginalization experienced by others (e.g., Daniels, 1967), in terms of being subject to a friendly but frivolous, superficial acceptance in the context. I felt as if I was actually making friends.

The role of 'sister' became increasingly solidified on a two week training camp. The camp was located an hour away from the usual training centre, and provided an environment where the athletes could concentrate solely on their rowing. Co-habiting with twelve males (ten rowers and two coaches) was pivotal in the development of a 'family' as the fathers (i.e., the coaches) dictated the events of the camp, the sons/brothers (i.e., athletes) complied with the parents' demands (i.e. trained hard) while I, the daughter/sister, took on the traditional female role (e.g., cooking, cleaning) in the house. This role I was happy to adopt because it allowed me to stay close to the field stay in the same accommodation as the coaches and athletes. The experience of the camp also tightened the bonds between the group as we confirmed our allotted and chosen roles. I felt that the rowers even began to care for me; their designated 'little sister'.

> *Journal entry*
>
> *In the boathouse after the row I was pre-occupied trying to find a place to put the water-bottles and spare clothing. As I was fumbling with the items I carrying, I felt a hand on my head which guided me out of the way of an on-coming boat being carried by the rowers just before it could have given me a painful bang on the head. After guiding me out of the way, Ben picked me up like a child, threw me over his shoulder and moved me out of the boathouse. 'Hey Shorty, are you Ok?' He was keeping me out of harm's way.*

Certainly, the relationships I was forming and had formed with each participant influenced the nature of the interaction between us and the subsequent information shared (Sparkes, 1994; Coffey, 1999). Here, we became more sensitive to each other's emotions as the exchanges became ever less formal and superficial and more candid and emotive. The depth of interaction with the athletes became more productive; a movement away from the initial constant jokey banter about the work, to the stresses and pressures they felt in the programme.

From: Tito@yahoo.com
Subject: Curious
Sent: Date withheld

Hey,
I wasn't in a very good mood this morning when I saw what I shall only refer to as "that memo" and it really, for want of a better word, fucked me right off …Consequently I don't have a lot of trust left …

It seemed I was no longer considered to be suspect; to all intents and purposes, I had negotiated the field successfully and was being granted access.

Changing parameters: A sexualized sibling

My on-going critical reflections during the field work soon began to highlight the fallacy of my assumption that I had somehow 'cracked it'; achieved the researcher's goal of acceptance. Indeed, I came to realize that a maintenance of the sister metaphor and persona was very much <u>my</u> construction and perception, and not one that was increasingly shared by the athletes. Beginning to more analytically unpack the conversations that occurred, the friendly banter which greeted initial acceptance became heavily laced with, and constantly underpinned by, sexual sarcasm and innuendo. With embarrassment I realized that I was certainly not or no longer viewed as a helpful, lightly teased little sister. The goal posts had been moved, and I had been too comfortable to notice.

> *Journal entry*
>
> *Today Hamish asked me, with a cheeky grin, if I wanted to practice making babies with him. The athletes who had overheard roared with laughter, both at his comment and at my expression! When I replied "no", he asked me if I would flash him from the coach-boat to make training more exciting.*

> *Journal entry*
>
> *Chad and Hamish asked me if I would go to their celebratory party when they were selected for an international crew. Chad said it was "for intercourse, oh, interaction". Laughing, Hamish said, "you wanted to know the culture!"*

Such humour plays a significant part in consolidating male peer group cultures by offering a sphere for conveying masculine identities (Kehily and Nayak 1997) while it can also be used as a catharsis for anxieties (Goffman, 1959), to neutralize feelings (Mercier, 1926), to bolster morale (Snyder, 1991), as an outlet for boredom (Snyder, 1991), and to unite a group (Crawley, 2004). The latter point is of particular importance to a collective that feels threatened (due to selection or non-selection for top crews) as humour can provide an

integrative and communicative function (Crawley, 2004). The sexually based banter could also be interpreted as a method by which the participants were able to fashion a dominant heterosexual masculinity. Here the athletes' comments, permeated by swearing, ridicule and comments about women as sexual objects, assisted in the development of a shared masculinity. This sense of masculinity was, in part, achieved through my objectification as a woman (Bird, 1996).

Far from being accepted as a cheery sister then, my role now demanded that I consider the change in context (Van Maanen, 1988). My relationships with the athletes had transformed, and I too had to change to maintain the position of acceptance previously achieved. I became the butt of sexual jokes, providing a common point of humour as the tension, in terms of ultimate selection from the programme, began to emerge in earnest. My assumptions of acceptance had been unmasked. As Adams (1999) notes, being a 'guest' and accepting the hospitality of context, had somewhat blinded me to the price that had to be paid. Here, the guest must submit to the attentions of the host, be they welcome or not. As with every exchange there is a trade off; my price for access and acceptance in the field had been a loss of power principally in how I defined myself as a female researcher. Like Adams, once I had accepted the initial terms of the 'guest contract', I found it very difficult to re-negotiate my role away from the developed sexualised one; I was positioned where the rowers wanted me to be. Indeed, by agreeing or signing the contract, I appeared to have also signed away a considerable part of my power or agency over how I wanted to be seen.

As the athletes recognised that I did not respond negatively to the verbal banter, unspoken rules related to 'comfortable' or acceptable interaction became constantly re-set (Fine, 1987). Whilst the joking was predominantly verbal, towards the end of the programme the athletes increasingly tested the limits of acceptability as their interactions became more physical, although still playful, in nature.

> *Journal entry*
>
> *I hopped on a stationary bicycle to keep the guys company as they warmed up. While I was biking, Ben poked me in the behind with a bottle of water. Shocked, I fell off the bike. Everyone who witnessed the event howled with laughter.*

According to Blackman (2005), sex, as opposed to sexual intercourse, in the field needs to be seen in a much broader context; where play, close contact and flirtation are part of the ethnographic endeavour. Such intimacy allows for access to more 'private spaces' and a better grasp of the dialogue between researcher and participant. Indeed, some view such encounters as a normal and natural aspect of ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., Gearing, 1995; Altork, 1995). Similarly, there was no doubt that the rapport developed between the athletes and myself, through the roles we played, impacted the nature of the information that was shared (Sparkes, 1994). Through my acquiescence to the sexualised discourse that increasingly surrounded us, I seemed to be granted access to more intimate conversations with the participants.

> *Journal entry*
>
> *How the interaction with the rowers has changed since the project started. We've gone from polite, formal conversations to constant sexual innuendoes. It's as though it's a competition to see who can get the bigger reaction from me by increasing the amount of disgusting things they say. Ordinarily I would not put myself in such an environment but in this case I feel that I have to put up with it – it's a price I have to pay for being in 'their' world. In the meantime I have to pretend that everything they say is funny because I'm afraid that if I showed my true feelings they'll shut down and not tell me anything.*

While in any other context I would have not permitted the sexual banter, I tolerated and even encouraged it by pretending it didn't bother me and, at times, reciprocating. I was concerned that my 'true' reaction would cause the participants to align me with people they considered to be boring, 'square' and didn't like (e.g. coaches). Aware that my data was at stake, I reconceptualised a fieldworker-self which could

help me 'get on' with the task at hand (Coffey, 1999). In this case, the benefit of being included in the dialogue, with the potential of gathering 'richer' data outweighed the cost of compromising my sense of self. However, as the banter evolved into physical form, no doubt it became increasingly problematic at a personal level. The fieldwork ended shortly after the 'bottle' incident, leaving the question of how much I would actually have put up with in this regard an unanswered question.

In terms of data collection, no doubt the relationships I formed with each participant influenced the nature of the interaction between us and, subsequently, the information that was shared (Sparkes 1994). While some (e.g. Hunt & Benford, 1997) would query the ethics behind my conduct in the field and whether I was exploiting my position or the participants' perceptions of me. Doing so questions the difference between impression management and manipulation, which has been an ongoing debate in qualitative research. In my defence, I believe that my behaviour was no more manipulative than that which is implicit in social life (de Laine, 2000). In many ways, if my fieldwork behaviour can be questioned, it could be argued that so should that of the participants. How much of a 'front' were they putting on? How much was I being manipulated to tell a particular story?

It is impossible to determine what an 'outsider' would have gleaned from taking random 'snapshots' of the training, nor can I think of what information would be gathered by another observer who undoubtedly would have his or her own repertoire of roles. The point to be made, however, is that a reflexive perspective proved invaluable in the gathering of data, as I was able to access and see the programme and its participants at several levels. To do so, I had to act out various roles, each different yet complimentary within a dynamic situation comprising evolving relationships. Being a neutral, passive observer was just not a workable option.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the continuous development of the researcher's role as a field-work project unfolded by "writ[ing] about personal involvement in the research process" (Cotterill & Letherby, 1994: 131). Premised on the belief that to better understand our participants "we should be concerned with more than our findings" (Cotterill & Letherby, 1994: 282) I have attempted to provoke questions regarding the field-worker's place and evolving personas in the research setting. In this respect, the study is grounded in the belief that we should not and cannot leave our informants to "carry the burdens of representations [while] we hide behind the cloak of alleged neutrality" (Fine, Weiss, Weseen &Wong, 2003: 168).

Although the findings presented do not provide a universal interpretation of my experiences, they remain a useful starting point in examining agential responses to others' changing perceptions. Additonally, using a dramaturgical perspective enabled an examination of ideas such as the dynamic 'face' of fieldworkers, which are not normally mentioned (Edgley, 2003). While Irwin's call for greater credence to be paid to structure in interpreting field-workers' actions is acknowledged, my experience resonated more with what I was able to do with the context(s) offered. Consequently, although my reflexive thoughts and conversations made me aware of the social strategies I employed in the quest for data, including a tendency towards occupying a more explicitly gendered space in the interaction, they were not done so in some dark Machiavellian way. Rather, I saw them as part of my expressive self; what Goffman refers to as 'self-in-role', in which my role identities overlapped lessening the transition between who I was and how I interpreted and expressed myself as a researcher.

This of course is not to say that I didn't face ethical dilemmas. Although beyond the general scope of this paper, needless to say, I became aware of sensitive issues emerging in conversations with athletes, which only did so as a consequence of the relationships I deliberately nurtured with them. No doubt, this increased

the participants' vulnerabilities. However, as in Fine and Weiss's (Fine et al., 2003) inner city study, the subjects here also recognized and to a certain extent exploited the power inequalities in the research process. They knew I could take their accounts to other coaches, administrators and policy makers in ways they could not. As I had used my researcher role then, they used their positions as 'participants'. This is not to abdicate responsibility for personal actions, as my behaviours were certainly my own. However, to expect me to be one of a 'team' which, as in any close group, involves a level of intimacy while, at the same time, maintain sufficient distance (Strobel, 2006) was not a workable option.

The results of this work point to the negotiated place of the researcher within ethnographic fieldwork, which stems from the pressures upon, and the agency of, both observer and observed. The value of this work lies in creating awareness of the contentious constructed nature of ethnographic research; of how we gain access and what happens to us as researchers when we "marinate in the midsts" of our subjects (Wacquant, 2005: 450). Its significance also lies in raising awareness of the differing and changing roles we play as researchers, and how such roles as interpreted by others affects the knowledge we produce about respondents. For me, these changed from superficial daughter to budding sister, both generally underpinned by being a 'mascot', to that of a sexualised sibling, where the interactions became increasingly risqué and immodest. Additionally, by examining the everyday actions and strategies of a neophyte researcher I have tried to generate interest into the complexity of the researcher's position and how it can (and perhaps should) be manipulated to cope with the dynamic relationships within the field. It is hoped that the work demonstrates how an analysis of researcher behaviour and roles can help us understand the complex interactions that develop in the field. Our hope is that this story will ignite interest in others to reflexively look at how they construct their roles, how these roles evolve, and the impact such roles have on the data collected, thus better locating conclusions in the messy social world of practice.

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