

Book: *TENSIONS AND POSITIONINGS: ETHNOGRAPHIES IN PAN PACIFIC RESEARCH*

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Chapter Title: Accompanied by suspicion: An ethnographic account of negotiating gender tensions and positionings in counselling practice and researching child sexuality

Author: Paul Flanagan, Department of Human Development & Counselling,
University of Waikato

Introduction

This chapter presents my experience of journeying into research on the contentious area of sexuality in childhood. Reflecting on experiences from professional, personal and academic contexts, I expose occasions of discomfort, unease and public questioning of my integrity – because I am male, and because of the sensitive subject area of this research: children and sexuality. Revealing a number of discursive contexts (not only am I male, but my counselling practice has largely been with children and in the area of child sexual abuse and child sexual activity) the question is boldly presented – how do I balance gender tensions and positionings? I recognise that gender tensions are an appropriate challenge within a research and public media gaze that calls for accountability for the extent and dominance of child and sexual abuse perpetrated by males. Responding to and within constraints of others' perceptions and maligning remarks, I acknowledge that questions of gender and safety are appropriate and hold value for me, about how I step into researcher positioning taken up in this study. A sense of advocacy and social justice underpins my commitment to this research making suspicion an uncomfortable but valuable participant to negotiate in this process.

Tensions of sexuality in childhood

Childhood and sexuality are two words that are infrequently joined in a sentence unless one expects to be confronted with accounts of sexual abuse or abnormal activity. Practising as a counsellor brought me into contact with children and families (specifically, counselling practice with boys, aged 12 years and under, within both statutory and community contexts). A range of discursive contexts and assumptions often framed children as victims or perpetrators of sexual aggression. There was little space for any other possibilities in adults' understandings of events. Teachers and parents, and specialists in diagnostic assessment and therapeutic interventions, largely took a position of perceiving deviancy within children's sexual actions.

For children who had engaged in sexual activity with other children, consequences usually included some form of monitoring and surveillance, often to the point of isolation or marginalisation. My counselling practice had taken up a political position of questioning and challenging taken-for-granted or official assumptions about what children's sexual actions might mean (Flanagan 2010). This work often involved dancing between advocacy for children and families in support of them within legal and social service contexts, and co-constructing narratives in counselling that accounted for multiple identity possibilities for these children and families apart from a deviancy-dominated problem narrative. Through this work I have shaped a research pathway to expose and analyse discourses that construct the ideas and practices which inform adults' responses to children's sexual activity (Flanagan 2011). This pathway from counselling practice into research includes a survey with primary school principals on their experiences and responses to children's sexual actions (Flanagan 2009); publishing concerns about children being judged without understanding their intentions, and, investigating social and professional discourses that produce thin or narrow identity conclusions for these children through unhelpful and usually unfair labels (Flanagan 2012, 2013).

I refer to these publications to set a context for what follows, and to invite you to think about how I am positioning myself in this work. It is a project, as Denzin reflects, that "asks that I make myself visible in my text" (2000, 402). I am currently engaged in doctoral study that seeks to explore discourses of sexuality in childhood, through focus groups and interviews with teachers, counsellors, parents, and hopefully, children. This research is a political act, generated by the experience of counselling, which itself is a political action that deconstructs unhelpful constructions of children's identities.

My interest in the lived and embodied experiences of sexuality in the lives of children, and how they are discursively positioned invites ongoing ethical tensions and necessitates ongoing conversation

with many consultants and potential participants (see Flanagan 2012, 2013). However, the focus of this chapter is to tell some of this journey in negotiating my own positioning as a researcher within these and other discourses which are (understandably) heavy with suspicion of male interest in children and sexuality. I locate this writing alongside Hartnett's (Alexander 2005, 434) "performative citizenship", and with Denzin's description of a "vulnerable, performative ethnography" that:

...represents a call to action and morally informed social criticism.

...connect[s] good and bad stories to the circumstances of the media...to history, culture and political economy.

[And]...searches for new ways to locate and represent the gendered, sacred self in its ethical relationships to nature. (2000, 404)

I also suggest that this kind of research speaks not only to my own identity and value claims, but also exposes positionings related to sexuality in adults' lives.

Considering the area of counselling work described, and an on-going research interest in the area of sexuality in childhood, any reader may well ask, "Is it any wonder that suspicion is accompanying you – a fifty-something male, asking questions about children and sexual activity?" The topic for research is sensitive – and here am I, a *male* researching *sexuality in childhood*.

The positioning of being *male* in relation to *children*, and its connectedness to *sexuality*, is articulated in many ways in our society. Entertainment, advertising, sport, and other practices of gender discourse, both hide and display a range of ideas and practices that position men as powerful, aggressive, masculine and macho (see Crocket's (2013) concept of hypermasculinity to describe problematic male performance) - resulting in messages that 'men focus on sex', bringing forward sexualisation within every day and familiar moments. Stoltenberg (2000) rejects the idea that we should put up with and passively accept these notions – which he sees as contributing to the abuse of women through violence and pornography. Within an Aotearoa New Zealand context,

Adams (2012, 8) challenges men to confront violence perpetrated by men within conversations about intimacy, and through “the ways men connect and relate to each other as men”. How are men positioned in relation to children, and furthermore, in relation to sexuality in childhood?¹

In this chapter I present three stories in which I reflect on positioning as a male in relation to children, and then further reflect on how these positions have effects for me as a researcher in this work. These stories articulate a transitional moment as they tell of, and hold, some discomfort for me, particularly within my doctoral research project, and for my career as an emerging academic. I reflect on this threshold (see Jackson & Mazzei 2012, 6) at which I experience pause and caution, excitement and a sense of unknowing – and what this might mean for me as a researcher in relation to children and significant adults in their lives.

I am interested in the effects that everyday practices in media and social discourses have for a male researching childhood sexuality. I consider my own safety and the potential for risk, not only in the unusual contexts of therapy and research, but even within experiences that seem quite ordinary.

This first story takes up an experience of self-questioning when flying between two New Zealand cities as I sit next to a twelve-year old boy; the second involves a fictional story about a colleague’s personal and confidential information being publicly disclosed casting an aspersion on his credibility as a safe and ethical practitioner; and lastly, the third story explores an experience of regulatory practice through editorial review when a piece of my writing was censored as contentious and unlikely to be allowed by the publisher.

Story 1: Being an adult male - under suspicion

In December 2011 I had an experience that caused me to question how I was being “positioned” by flight cabin crew, when seated on a plane next to a twelve-year-old boy. He and I spoke together a

number of times throughout the 80-minute flight. I spoke about my own 12 year old son, and this boy spoke of travelling to play in a national tennis competition for his age. On each of these occasions of conversation, and frequently on other occasions, one of the female cabin crew would come and speak *across* me, directly to him, and ask “are you all right?” “is everything okay?” “are you okay?” “are you okay sitting here?” These interactions by cabin crew occurred at least eight times. While I prefer to hold on to thinking that this was care by the airline staff for a child travelling alone, I also sat with some discomfort about whether I was a focus of suspicion. And if this was so, was there any reason that invited suspicion apart from me being an adult male?

There are experiences of men within our society who have been positioned in their relations with children because of their maleness. Hodgetts and Rua (2008) write about the experience of a man who was a passenger on a domestic flight being asked to shift seats because he had been seated by a child. This story had been in the national news media. The inference made was that there was potential risk for the child by being seated next to an adult male unknown to that child. In a further article by Hodgetts and Rua (2010) on male identity and the media, where they note that psychologists give “scant attention to the positive relationships and community contributions of working class men who are not in trouble” (155), they claimed that,

It is through mundane social interactions with media images, friends and family that these men’s sense of self and relationships appear to be cultivated and revised. ... their identities are relationally constructed in that men often define themselves in terms of their relationships with children, partners and mates. (2010, 166-167)

Horton (2001, 2008) questions how gender has effects within research and describes the struggle as “a sense of failure” (2008, 363). As a researcher of children’s geographies, Horton described moments within research where he was brought into tricky and messy situations – although he had planned and

sought ethical review and approval. No matter how well intentioned he was to grapple with the issue, there was always difficulty in getting “to the heart of the matter” or “to adequately articulate myself”:

...a sense of failure in making sense of the ways in which my positionality, especially my masculinity, matters in my research practice. As a male adult who regularly works with children and young people I am especially, constantly (made) self-aware of my gender.

(2008, 364)

As I reflect on my experience, and how I was positioned by cabin crew sitting with the twelve-year-old boy, I resonate with Horton’s ideas and question how I position myself, and am positioned by others, in this tricky and uncomfortable area of research. Reflecting on my identity as a researcher, and following Hodgetts and Rua’s ideas of identity construction through social interaction, I grasp onto awareness of questions about gender and power relations. I am invited into a reflexive exploration: how do I relate; how do I position myself; how I am positioned by others throughout the research? I position myself in this research to be open and accountable to any questions, challenges and possible suspicion by parents and teachers considering their inclusion. So too, in analysing, writing and presenting the research, I question my own positioning in relation to the participants and their stories. Sexual abuse and violence on children in our society is perpetrated predominantly by men, and it is understandable that in a study of sexuality in childhood, fear and mistrust could visit when the researcher is male. My preference is to invite transparency, asking participants what questions or concerns about me being male that they might want us to be explicit about. This preference invites action as an effect of awareness. It is ethical to declare my own discomfort and acknowledge the possible discomfort for participants. Where others display discomfort with me, as with the example of the cabin crew, I am called into an ethical stance to acknowledge, at least to myself, that their position is based on their own understanding of care for children and ideas that inform of possible risk for a child’s safety.

The experience of sitting next to the boy in the plane has afforded me a small insight into the world of children, where adults frequently interpret and construct meaning of children's experience. Adultist approaches and power relations with children support constructions of meaning that may not relate to the child's understanding (see LeFrançois 2013). Adult-centric and paternalist readings of contexts do not make available other possibilities of meaning. On the plane, it was as if my own actions of speaking and relating to the boy were interpreted and understood by the crew as (potentially, at least) an adult male holding abusive intentions. However, I was not the child and yet I experienced dis-ease about how my actions were interpreted. There was no space to speak into the unasked questions about my intentions.

Story 2: A male counsellor under suspicion

The second story also examines positioning as a male, but with potential effects for positioning as a researcher of sexuality in childhood. I adopt fictional narrative (see Rinehart 1998) to describe experiences and transitions in some men's lives to explore elements of risk within professional contexts. While this story is not a factual account of a male practitioner, it explores truths that emanate from conversations I have had with men – men who are professional colleagues, and men who I have connected with in counselling boys and their families.

Gerard (not his real name) was a practitioner in New Zealand working as a family counsellor, often meeting with children (boys) who had engaged in sexual actions with other children. In this work he held views of questioning taken for granted ideas of gender, and of the effects of gender discourse in the lives of young boys and how this shaped their understandings of relationships and sexuality. Gerard had formed his approach to this work through his own experience and learning, in addition to an academic professional programme.

This particular story involves an occasion in which Gerard carefully shared some personal information with a co-worker whom he trusted and considered a confidante. There was a sense of trust and collegiality in their working relationship together, so Gerard assumed confidentiality about what he was saying. He was telling his co-worker about some of his own experiences as he grew up, locating these stories within a context of developing identity as a young man negotiating relationships with women in young adulthood. He admitted that in some of these relationships he was not as respectful as he now would like to have been, and that he had some misgivings. He told of his knowledge of gender relations through his family, schooling and circle of friends, and how these contexts sustained views of male dominance and power, and of female subservience and sexuality. Asked some questions about this, Gerard shared about times where he considered his actions represented ideas and practices of masculinity as competitive and expecting to “score” with females (see Adams 2012). He also mentioned that, at that time, he would access internet pornography which supported these ways of thinking about women, about himself as a male, and the views he had about relating with women.

Gerard spoke to his colleague about how his life had changed, and the ways he had shifted in his awareness about the effects for him and those he cared for of his previous thinking and actions. In particular, he acknowledged how his relationship with his partner of 15 years had brought about new understandings of respect and love, and of the harmful effects of dominant sexist attitudes portrayed in media advertising and popular television and film stories. He also talked about his concern for his daughter, and wondered how he could have earlier held those perceptions and acted in the ways that these perspectives allowed (see Stoltenberg 2000). Gerard’s sharing about this history was intentional, to speak about possibilities of change and of holding hope for the boys and men he worked alongside.

Sometime later a disagreement developed in their workplace during which two conflicting groups formed. Gerard and his colleague found themselves on opposite sides. The personal information, shared by Gerard within a confidential context, was publicly disclosed to discredit and malign him. Gerard was 'outed' as a user of pornography and a philanderer. The story of Gerard's historical thinking and actions was presented as a current lifestyle. There was no suggestion of his narrative of personal development and change. This action by Gerard's colleague was clearly unethical (see NZAC 2002/2012, s.7). The information was presented to other staff as seeding doubt about their colleague, questioning how appropriate it was for him to work in this agency, and about his personal ethics. The potential effect for Gerard was daunting. His integrity and professionalism was questioned. His credibility as an ethical counsellor, as well as a safe counsellor with children, was obscured. He was positioned as vulnerable to such vicious sharing of misinformation, aware of potential effects for his counselling practice with children.

Gerard's professional and personal identity was maligned by someone that he had had a close professional relationship with, and whose inference positioned him within a range of discourses that shape ideas around males working in counselling and with children - ideas that position males interested in sexuality and childhood as suspect. In some ways, I have to admit, I sympathise with this suspicion. Although holding multiple identities as a father, as a counsellor who has worked within child protection and with sexually abused children, a trustee on a school board for 10 years, and with 10 years on research ethics committees, I even find myself a little suspicious of men who hold such interest. What might this understanding offer me in thinking about a man research sexuality in childhood?

The fact that I had previously been a priest in the Catholic Church could further add to discomfort for others. There have been many assertions made about clergy (particularly Catholic clergy) in the light of frequent and seemingly-unending revelations of child sexual abuse. While acknowledging the

horrific nature of clergy abuse, some media reporting appears to induce fear that is not substantiated in reality (see Glasner 1999²). So I am further viewed as suspect, as having been one of a group of publicly-suspected men who tend to carry a discursive stigma connected with ideas of celibacy, sexuality, patriarchy and abuse of power relations in multiple contexts: most notably regarding gender and culture.

The stories presented in this chapter, including Gerard's, relate to me personally and professionally – and they fit within wider discourses of masculinity, gender violence and abuse, yet have real effects for how others perceive me and position me, and how I position myself in relation to these potential positionings by others. There is risk in presenting these stories, and presenting one's self as researcher in this context. In this exposition there is value of taking up a position of accountability: presenting ideas to other parents, to teachers, to counsellors and with peers. In addition, there are the accounts of one's work to publishers and peer reviewers.

Story 3: A male author under suspicion

This story relates to peer review, as I reflect on my positioning as researcher and writer, about a topic that sits discordantly for many people – that of childhood and sexuality, especially when sexuality is *acted out* in childhood. I had sent a piece of my writing for review. The reviewers responded,

We are a little concerned about the topic area which is very sensitive and needs to be made clearer – where you are situating your argument ... in the debates you raise. As it stands it may be misinterpreted by the publisher

I found myself responding to this as useful feedback, valuable to think about the audience reading the text – but also disappointing. What call is there for exploring interpretations? Where can one share the ideas and questions and debate on the issues I was exploring, in particular, about boys' exploration and cultural, social and religious concepts of limits? [Please note: I am not advocating for total or an uncritical sexual freedom for young children].

I realise, that in my eagerness and my own developed interest in this area, I was taking up an idea of Albert Moll's, in which he suggested: "an advance in our knowledge of the sexual life of the child will indirectly enrich our knowledge also of the sexual life of the adult" (Moll 1912, xi). The reviewers' feedback to including this quotation was: "This is quite a contentious quote Paul - I think we may have to take it out?"

In an age where social and cultural constraints on speaking about sexuality, particularly related to childhood, is in contrast to the exposure and less-defined constraints of sexuality in the media, should we not explore some ideas of what we understand as sexuality in relation to younger human beings, and how this has effects for the ways we act, speak and set policy? Children are frequently exposed to sexual references in media (cartoons, TV sitcoms, song lyrics and videos). Child protection discourse is rich with theory and practice which positions children as vulnerable and helpless, and in many ways closes opportunities to speak openly about this topic (see Robinson 2005, 2013). Furthermore, the moral panic that can result from media and selective exposure of abusive actions by men on children contributes to constructions of men as risky, suspect and unsafe: a gendered position that I cannot escape from. Rather than simply state a claim to the contrary, I am required to acknowledge the effects of male abuse and gendered power relations, discourses in which I am immersed.

Sikes (2008) wrote about an experience in which her research was misreported and misinterpreted: further, it was misrepresented. Media reported that Sikes supported illegal and unethical sexual relationships between male teachers and female students. These erroneous reports brought a moral backlash and ensuing panic, with comments and criticisms from people throughout the English-speaking world, condemning her and her work – reproaching her for things that were reported she had said, which she hadn't. Sikes noted,

The climate of moral panic that pertains around child abuse is such that any research that touches on children and sex is almost seen in itself to be abusive, with identity and career consequences for those who engage in it. (2008, 235)

I wonder what different responses a male researcher might have experienced, and what planning is necessary for me to protect myself in my own research identity and career.

Other researchers have spoken about the difficulty in having parents' consent for children's participation in sexuality research. Fortenberry (Bancroft 2003) noted that,

I think what that suggests is, rather than be extraordinarily sensitive to the sexual content of our work, is that we have to be more proactive in promoting research as the public good and perhaps a social responsibility. (62)

Jenkins (Bancroft, 2003) continues, by connecting social and community responses to discourses of the media.

In studying refusals to participate, I wonder if one factor might be media coverage, or media stereotypes over the last eight to ten years and the suggestion is, if you allow

your children to be interviewed about sex then the interviewers are likely to evolve bogus charges of child sexual abuse. (63)

Other men under suspicion

A number of people who were present when the genesis of this chapter was presented as a paper at the 2012 CEAD conference³ gave responses, some of them sharing their own experiences of gendered positioning in relation to children.

One man spoke of being “a Play Centre Dad”, helping out at his children’s early childhood centre. He recounted one occasion where a day trip away from the centre had been planned. Another father had also volunteered to support the group outing. The man spoke of how the decision was made on the day to cancel the trip by some of the women who suggested that because “it was a bit cloudy” there was a chance of rain. This man commented that the implicit message was that because *men* were accompanying children there was potential risk. He reflected further that, “People don’t talk about the discomfort around men’s ‘interest’ in kids. The two dads at the Play Centre didn’t talk about it. There is shame”. This man spoke of his anger at how this was unfair to the children, and to him, yet there was a sense of needing to “accept it” and “be stoic”. He said, “If I express my feelings about this I’ll just be judged”.

I am reminded by this story of another man who parented his young sons on his own. He told of occasions when friends of his sons were invited to come to their home – but would not. He understood that his gender as the single parent precluded his sons’ friends’ parents permitting their children to go and play or stay.

A female conference delegate supported making transparent ‘the elephant in the room’. She voiced the possibility for potential risks in speaking these ideas and experiences. Calling upon Foucault’s⁴

notions of risks of silence and risks of speaking, she acknowledged this paper as an opportunity to articulate these ideas, a process to “talk it through”, to engage in “working this out” with others. While she referred to the conference as a forum for engagement, I take up this writing too, as part of the process of exploration, inquiry, articulation and debate (see Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

Positioning myself as politically gendered

So why am I (a pakeha (white), male, former-Catholic-priest, counsellor-cum-researcher) doing this?

- I remember the children who have shared their stories with me in counselling, whose identities are discursively shaped by a range of adult understandings of their actions based on a dominant story of deviancy.
- I want to hold hope for multiply-storied identities that valued far more than a single or small component of a child’s lived experience.
- I recall hearing narratives of how children are responded to in home and school settings that position them as deviant, potentially setting up identities that diminish possibilities for understandings of exploring sexuality and for ‘moderated masculinities’ (see Crocket, 2013) – and want to offer teachers, parents and counsellors ways to deconstruct the events of children’s actions in ways that provide room for respect, responsibility and discipline.
- I recollect receiving feedback and support from principals, teachers, social workers, and parents who appreciated exploring different ways of thinking about sexual activity in children’s lives, particularly when they had felt constrained by notions of abuse-dominated interpretations of children’s actions.
- I have received encouragement from academic colleagues who acknowledge this work as ‘important’, ‘a significant contribution’, ‘sensitive and worth inquiry’, and a necessary critique of discourses that harmfully position children in their family and education contexts.
- I hold the confidence and support and interest of supervisors, the ethics committee, and my family.

There are tensions in being a male researching sexuality in childhood. Stoltenberg (2000) calls on men to refuse positions of being a man that take up the dominant discursive ideas and practices that shape males as a simplistic binary to females: rough and aggressive, rather than gentle and emotional. Being male involves a discursive positioning which invites potential fears and suspicions about intentions of male interest in children and sexuality. Simply disclosing a personal awareness of this discomfort is insufficient, but my preference is to proactively name 'the elephant in the room' to participants within a research context.

I choose to take up a position that acknowledges the 'nasty stuff' about being male, acknowledging that fear and suspicion sit with me, not from any personal action of mine, but from the gendered discursive place in which I am positioned. I think I need to talk with parents and participants about whether there are concerns, questions, and fears – and ask how these can be responded to, to their satisfaction.

Conclusion

Reflecting on positioning, previously as a priest⁵, a counsellor, a practitioner among colleagues, and now as a researcher, I am aware of the tightrope I tread in the awful wider context of abuse by men on children – of which we are often reminded. This is not a position I can hide from or pretend to ignore or walk independently of. Yet, in the awareness I hold, I cannot simply state "I'm aware" and let that stand as sufficient. It is with discomfort and acknowledgement of men's abuse on children that I speak to two aspects of positioning – one from being male, a gendered position; the other as a researcher exploring a tricky topic, sexuality in childhood. Sexuality in childhood is a discursively tense construct which invites many responses: suspicion, as well as silence, non-communication, challenge, attack, interest, curiosity, and for some, including my preferred position, a level of ethical inquiry and critical understanding.

I give the last word to Baldwin (Stoltenberg 2000), that we can be different from how discourse characterises us – and in fact, rise above and beyond through exposing our own vulnerability, questioning and challenging that which is not respectful and ethical.

The world's definitions are one thing and the life one actually lives is quite another.

One cannot allow oneself, nor can one's family, friends, or lovers – to say nothing of one's children – to live according to the world's definitions: one must find a way, perpetually, to be stronger and better than that. (ix)

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¹ Robinson (2013) explores ideas of moral panic that are "focused on stranger danger [which] reinforces myths and stereotypes about children's public vulnerabilities" (p.63).

² Glasner (1999) questions news media coverage of 'Raw numbers and pedophile priests' (p.35) and 'Strange and sinister men' (p.38).

³ Contemporary Ethnography Across the Disciplines Hui 2012, 21-23 November, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. See <http://cead.org.nz/includes/download.aspx?ID=125054>

⁴ See Foucault's ideas on governmentality and inquiry, related to "technologies of the self", regulation and surveillance.

⁵ While in ministry as a priest, a priest-colleague whom I admired and saw as a mentor, was arrested, charged, convicted and jailed for sexual abuse of adolescent males. Later a religious brother teaching at an intermediate school I had attended as a child was also convicted for the sexual abuse of boys. I did not, nor did any of my friends that I'm aware of, experience sexual abuse by clergy or teaching brothers. The exposure of these men's abuse of boys had effects for me--as their abuses occurred in the town where I grew up and have family and friends--as well as continuing effects for wider professional, religious and educational communities.