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Andrew, Yarrow, Corr, Lara, Lent, Connie, O'Brien, Maeve, Osgood, Jayne ORCID:
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9424-8602> and Boyd, Margaret (2018) Worthwhile work?
Childcare, feminist ethics and cooperative research practices. *Gender and Education*, 30 (5) .
pp. 553-568. ISSN 0954-0253 [Article] (doi:10.1080/09540253.2016.1247948)

Final accepted version (with author's formatting)

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Worthwhile work? Childcare, feminist ethics and cooperative research practices

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Interdisciplinary research collaborations are often encouraged within higher education while the practicalities of such collaborations are glossed over. This project specifically addresses the praxis of research collaborations, exploring how feminist academics within different countries and disciplines came together to explore their mutual concern about the perceived worth and wellbeing of early childhood practitioners. Engaging in a formal methodological dialogue over eight months, seven academics discussed, analysed and dissected their different investments in research methods and intents, with the aim of agreeing to a common methodological framework. Unexpectedly, what emerged was not a product, but a process. We argue that this process offers much to those seeking deep collaboration in and through shared research. Building on a collective research interest, we found ourselves in a process of becoming, germinating the seed of a transnational research cooperative, based on trust and mutual respect, rather than the arid methodological contract originally envisioned.

Keywords: early childhood; methodology; feminist research practices; transnational cooperation; dialogue; research configuration

Word count: 7557 (with references).

Introduction

All researchers are likely to be shaped, whether consciously or not, by their disciplinary context, their theoretical frameworks, their methodological practices and their personal identities and commitments. This paper explores how seven feminist academics across national borders sought to reconcile these significant differences through the experience of coming together on a shared set of research projects around the undervaluing of early childhood education and care (ECEC) work internationally. We share a concern that the before-school years are increasingly seen as a vital foundation to modern educational systems, while those who work in this field remain poorly paid and often considered little more than babysitters. Through a formal process of reading, consultation and dialogue, participants shared their intellectual aims, as well as their hopes and fears, in regard to this research collaboration.

As feminists, we experience some common ground, not least because we share an interest in the worth and value of childcare work, and the impact this has on the wellbeing of the many women employed across this diverse field. Yet we do not often have to defend or define our feminism in our research, as this usually remains a subtext in the ethics proposals we submit, the abstracts we write, or the papers we present. However this dialogic process forced us to explore what these nuanced feminist commitments might look like in the process of working and speaking collectively on the challenges experienced by early childcare workers and educators worldwide. Our rationale for this project is our belief that the experiences of the ECEC workforce tell a powerful story about the ongoing inequities of a heteronormative binary-gendered system. This is a global story, driven by the 'universal' need to care for children, and it must be tackled transnationally, with policymakers held to account through powerful narratives of misrecognition and maldistribution.

Literature Review

Feminist researchers have long been concerned not just to address women's disadvantage in the social world, but also to ensure that the research itself does not contribute to this disadvantage, especially for those experiencing intersecting forms of inequality (e.g., Smith 1999, 161; Hill Collins 2000). As Haraway argued in regard to situated knowledges, '[t]he knowing self is partial in all its guises.... always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another' (1988, 586, emphasis in original). We believe new methodologies are necessary to address the intersecting forms of inequality present in ECEC systems. Therefore, this methodological paper aims to contribute to the search for more engaged and nuanced research practices which can draw together researchers with a shared interest in a particular issue.

In doing so, we acknowledge Hughes and Lury's (2013) point that existing methodologies can be transformed by paying attention to the performative aspects of these practices, as we do here with our focus on collaboration, a longstanding feminist practice (Cancian 1992; Acker and Dillabough 2007; Lather 1991; Fine 1992). Our aim is to perform research collaboration differently, by exposing our (presumed unitary) selves to a dialogic engagement about what we do and who we are as researchers, and to make this manifest through a collective text. In doing so we are calling into question the 'I' of the researcher (Lenz-Taguchi 2013), and being reshaped by the research processes themselves, becoming drawn into a research mechanism - a praxis that reflects Suchman's (2012) concept of a *configuration*. Drawing on Haraway's (1991) concept of the cyborg, Suchman explores the 'entanglement of imaginaries and artefacts' (2012, 57) in ways that resonate with our sense of becoming a hybrid research entity.

A critical aspect of this is to find ways to work together in spite of the regularisation and normalisation of traditional methodological practices (Law 2004; Jackson and Mazzei 2012; Sandford 2015). In this project we have aimed to make visible the human, material, and discursive elements of research, and their inevitable entanglement with our specific methodological practices, disciplinary locations and theoretical frameworks (Lather and St. Pierre 2013). It is an ethical practice that begins with being honest with each other about our fears, our passions and our particularities – the materialities of our researcher-selves.

It is because of our shared concern, as Dimitriadis puts it, to 'make the tools of inquiry available to people who want to understand their lives and circumstances better and to avoid obscuring power' (2015, 592), that we are committed to transformative methodologies. Traditional methodological reporting is frequently about hiding the messiness inherent in doing research, so that the ethical quandaries and awkward human moments disappear in the service of performing competence as social science researchers (Koro-Ljungberg et al. 2015). In contrast, we elected to make transparent our process from the inception of this project, speaking beyond the research community to those whose working lives among children we aim to support, knowing that our presumed/assumed 'competence' and 'knowledge' can often be a barrier to open and trusting research relationships. We acknowledge that we stand alongside our research participants, politically and ontologically, sharing our analyses of the messy worlds we move within, both affected and affecting others (St. Pierre 2013).

Methodology

Data were gathered for this project through an eight-month dialogue and formal consultation process between the seven researchers involved, guided by the question; 'What methodologies will best examine workforce conditions, and build on the research team's skills?' An initial methodological provocation was negotiated

and documented, in a month-long exchange of emails and conversations between the two project initiators (YA & LC). This discussion starter challenged those within the project to critique or improve it, but also gave initial impetus to the process.

Methodological provocation

This provocation had three suggested methodological elements: first, a large quantitative survey component, using the Effort Reward Imbalance (ERI) instrument (Siegrist 2015); second, a set of semi-structured interviews to add context and meaning to the data that would be generated from the ERI, and lastly, a consultative analytic process involving researchers from outside that national research context. This set of methods was proposed to the group out of the belief that generating the attention of policy-makers to the issue of early childhood workers' worth and wellbeing requires 'authoritative' data capable of revealing the layered impacts of the current low status of this work.

It is also necessary to generate data that can be understood within a global context¹, given the prevalence of international comparative measures such as PISA (Bennett 2013; Carvalho and Costa 2015), and their impact on government policy. The ERI has been used across a wide variety of work settings, across multiple national contexts, and offers a persuasive baseline measure of the conditions of work - *as experienced by workers themselves* (e.g., Schreyer and Krause 2016). The project initiators wondered if this could be a useful way of grounding our qualitative data collection within one particular empirical measure of the relative satisfactions and difficulties experienced across different workplace contexts. We do not believe that the truth claims made on the basis of quantitative data are necessarily more robust than those made based on qualitative research (Maynard 2008), but are aware that providing a range of evidence for our claims will make this project harder to ignore by policy-makers and governments.

The qualitative component proposed consists of short semi-structured interviews, designed to be conducted by phone or VOIP services. Our aim with qualitative data collection is to build on the rich bodies of qualitative data already collected by the research team (e.g., CL 2015; JO 2012) and others in this sub-field (e.g., O'Connell 2011).

The final consideration was around how best to analyse such data, given the various disciplinary methods represented within the group. Analysis is often an under-theorised set of practices, with practices based on grounded theory (Bryman and Burgess 1994; Glaser and Strauss 1967) having gained ascendancy in recent years, although not without contestation (Timmermans and Tavory 2012; Thomas and James 2006). As critical scholars, we understand that analysis is not something that is begun once a neat pile of data has been gathered, but is a process that begins with the first conceptions of a new project, the reading in, the materialities and relationalities of the data collecting, and culminates in the various strategies used to gain insight into that material. It is about 'thinking, writing, working and being with,

entering into the research, producing subjectivities, and rewriting the self' (Koro-Ljungberg et al. 2015, 613), and this has been especially true within this collective process. In this project we conceptualise analysis as an ongoing dialogue, with our team members, with the research literature, with unknown readers and conference attendees, resonating with Mazzei's arguments about voice being a 'machinic assemblage' (2016, 158). This analysis will continue as our individual research is re-evaluated in the light of each of the ongoing projects. Honouring that spirit of dialogue means privileging multi-voiced papers where possible (such as this one) and resisting the competition for resources that increasingly informs the neoliberal academic environment (Johnson 2014).

Dialogic processes

The project initiators compiled a list of potential worldwide collaborators from those addressing early education and care workforce issues and sent an invitational letter that included a description of the proposed project. There was no way to predict who, or how many, would be interested, or even if this project would be viable, but it was understood that the process was a useful way of evaluating the ongoing potential of research in this area, by means of the responses of fellow-scholars experienced in this work. A short list of twelve collaborators was selected for the initial invitation, aiming for a spread of researchers across multiple countries, and a small but sufficient number for useful dialogue. Of these six agreed to be involved (one of whom suggested an additional researcher). Most of the remaining researchers expressed interest but lacked time for the project.

With a team of seven researchers in place, a formal response process was outlined, which gave each participant a specific two-week period in which to respond to the methodological provocation, including accumulated comments and contributions, and a final round of contributions to be completed by all participants at the end of this process. Our invitation proposed that we generate data through 'a structured email record of our negotiations, as well as our individual reflections on the emotional and intellectual challenges we encounter in this process' (Email to participants, 29/9/14). This was followed by an analysis of the accumulated data, which consisted of the core document of 17 000 words of data, plus additional documents/papers shared by participants during the process. This analysis had five stages. Firstly, rather than being a mechanical process, analysis began as the project team read the first contributor's response, and individually became enmeshed in their own interpretation of, and anticipated response to, the ongoing dialogue. Secondly, a more formal data analysis process began when the project initiators separately identified 'rich points' in the data, using an established abductive framework (Agar 1999). Thirdly, bringing these separate insights together within a dialogue process, 'surprising facts' (Agar 1999) were identified through discussion of commonalities or divergence in the coded data. The fourth stage was to consider these 'facts' (truth-claims) within the existing feminist and post-positivist theory we

were wrestling with around collaboration, finding particular connection with Suchman's work, which drew our attention away from our apparent aim around an aligned methodology to the ways in which our processes engaged us relationally and emotionally - and how valuable this had been - answering Haraway's urgent call for us to 'make kin' (Haraway 2015). The fifth and final stage of our analysis involved an invitation to test these insights, opening them up to critical scrutiny by the wider group, and fine-tuning the analysis reported below. Such an analysis can never be 'objective' given all our intimate entanglements in the data (Lather and St. Pierre 2013), and most of us felt some discomfort in reading and reflecting on our earlier contributions, during this analytic process.

Methodological challenges

Ethically and logistically, this sort of dialogue presented some challenges. We began with a single document to be shared via email, but it quickly became apparent that side-dialogues were happening via email between individual participants, leading to multiple layers of data. Although this multiplicity resonates with a post-foundational approach, we eventually settled on sharing additional thoughts and comments within a cloud-based document editing system², allowing real time collaboration across different time zones and in virtual space. This enabled the same document to be visible to all participants simultaneously.

There was also a power-disparity in the ordered process of responding to the methodological provocation. Being the first to respond was both confronting (given the relative unfamiliarity of other participants) but also potentially powerful, in terms of being able to send the dialogue down particular intellectual pathways. Our group represents academics from different points in their careers (early career researchers through to professors) and from diverse disciplinary contexts, making any response feel like a highly scrutinised academic performance. The differences in terminology between disciplines were part of this scrutiny, with particular words needing unpacking in terms of their usefulness to our collective project. This contestability of language cannot be resolved with any finality, but allows us to mobilise variations of such languages in future work depending on which person takes the lead in a writing project, and which audiences we are speaking to.

Results

This section reports on our analysis of the data generated through our dialogue (including the development of our approach, negotiation over research questions, affective responses within the process, and opinions about strategy) and discusses the results we saw emerging in this process. It does not make truth claims about similar dialogues conducted by other groups of researchers, but offers a number of reflections on our processes which might be useful.

Identity and positionality

One issue that became apparent from the outset was the realisation that our identities, both academically and personally, were at stake in this process in very visible ways (McQueen 2015). The act of committing opinions to ‘paper’ (or permanent textual representation) was a continuing reminder of the judgements that will be made by others on what we might write.

Identities as academics were foregrounded in particular ways. Sometimes this was explicit, such as Lara’s acknowledgement of her own disciplinary background;

I am a mixed-methods public health researcher and am interested in the connection between poor working conditions (including disrespect and denigration) on the mental health of child care workers.’ (LC II.194-6)

In these sorts of statements, participants used their particular discipline to signal the reason for their interest in this research area, but also as justification for particular theoretical alignments or methodological choices, such as the use of multiple methods common to public health research.

Our academic investments in familiar research practices came through strongly in the data. For example, Margaret suggested,

I would like to suggest that some consideration be given to the practice of community-based participatory research (CBPR) as an ‘orientation to inquiry’ that draws from critical pedagogy, critical theory and feminist theory. This would involve early childhood educators as researchers and collaborators in this study (MB II.141-144)

Interventions in the dialogue such as this one provoked ongoing discussion, as we tried to understand what such practices themselves would offer towards our eventual research collaboration, but also what meanings they held for that researcher, and the implications this might have for our work together.

There were many points at which the identity issues were more personal, reflecting the lifeworlds of particular participants. For example, Connie acknowledged identity struggles explicitly, saying;

As a person who worked as a caregiver and educator in early childhood for 40 years, I struggle to identify as an academic and am more at home with my identity as a member of the workforce we will study and theorize about. (CL II.986-8)

Such comments were a reminder that we are people with particular histories - many of us came to our concern about early childhood workforce issues through having a personal stake in the field, having experienced the ‘worthlessness’ of this work directly. As researchers we seek to understand the ethics of our changing relationship with those working in early education and care services, as we both advocate on behalf of what they do, but simultaneously experience greater privilege through our locations in academia.

Questions of authenticity appeared to emerge as well, as this comment by Maeve indicates;

I have found the conversations fascinating but at the same time I have felt awkward and reticent as someone who has never worked as an early childhood and care practitioner albeit that I spent nine years as a primary school teacher. (M'OB II.1311-3)

Although experience 'on the floor' was not a consideration when inviting researchers to participate, it is apparent that at this stage in the discussion Maeve had become aware of the discursive power that seemed to be available to those who had more intimate knowledge of the field.

These identity issues for us as researchers (and former caregivers) were never absent from the dialogue (DeVault and Gross 2012; Oliver 1992), as our written contributions necessarily reflected our hopes for how others might see us, both personally (e.g., respectful) and academically (e.g., theoretically insightful). Jayne and Yarrow, during the process of analysing these interactions, were struck by the sorts of identity-management work that could be read into very simple utterances, such as 'I'd love to know others' thoughts about this' (LC I.382). These are at the same time genuine expressions of interest in others' views, but also a public performance of 'open-mindedness' not necessarily reflected in our actual reactions. Acknowledging that analysis was an integral part of this process throughout, as researchers evaluated their own feelings and thoughts within the possibilities of the project, Jayne made this observation;

One of the most striking things to me is how our own personal/professional selves directly impact how (often and when) we are able to engage in this dialogue.... it's the clashes, collisions of these intimate - sometimes very routine - at others unexpected and traumatic - everyday life events - that are obscured from view. Similar - seeming irrelevancies, unanticipated dramas, the routine minutiae of everyday life for workers in ECE is what I would like to get at through our research. (JO II.1232-1241)

Jayne calls attention to our own imbrication as researchers in our lives outside academia, as well as our research within it, and the need to pay attention to this personal/professional blurring in the lives of workers within the field as well.

Resistances and frictions

'Resistance', and other expressions of dis-ease, were probably inevitable, under the assumption that academic work privileges strongly-held positions and individual intellectual decisiveness. Although the project initiators did not see themselves as taking up discursive power, the presentation of a methodological provocation at the outset was an unambiguous assertion of specific methodological locatedness, and one which created a 'dominant' discourse within the limited frame of this process. Sayer (2005) observes the ethical tensions that arise as bodies move into new sets of relationships, and the dissonance that is experienced in this movement, which can lead to resistance.

The primary form of this resistance, clearly observable in hindsight, was that of the project initiators to changes suggested by others, despite this being the alleged aim. So, for example,

This model seems to be the only equitable way, in my opinion, to balance the needs of parents/families, workers, and children, though I welcome others' thoughts on their 'ideal model' (YA II.414-416)

Although this comment was in response to more general concerns about the research focus on staff, rather than parents or systems, it illustrates the general defensiveness that could easily creep into the conversation. Despite the apparent 'welcoming' of others' viewpoints, identifying a personal view as 'the only equitable' way, leaves no room for other opinions, and certainly no alternate perspectives on what might constitute equity in this matter. One of the strengths of a dialogic approach is the gradual breaking down of such insider/outsider tensions, as participants begin to pay attention to their own and other's locations within the political and emotional landscape of the shared research area.

Other project members were confronted with the need to compare their own current research agendas with the data that might be generated through the methods proposed.

I think my hesitancy in responding to the proposal can be accounted for by the paradigm shift to my work and the implications that this has for what I consider counts as valid knowledge (JO II.11-12)

This represents an epistemological challenge, and at some level, given our positionality within the knowledge we become associated with, an ontological one. An attempt to gather researchers under one methodological project will inevitably involve resistance of this sort, and requires a willingness to explore points of connection and divergence openly.

Some challenges were more direct, in questioning the effort involved in some aspects of the proposed methodology in light of the possible rewards³.

I have a question about the perceived added value of analysing data from other countries. For me I am trying to become au fait with the changing contexts in Ireland and that is challenging as someone not directly in the field but working alongside it. To analyse data from another country involves outsider analysis! Feminist perspectives might vary on this' (M'OB II.1350-3)

The concern here appears to be a strong sense that analysis needs an intimate relationship with the context of that data, and the underlying policy debates within that context. The suggestion that members of the research team not directly involved in local data collection might provide useful insights was confronting to some, and involved deep questions about the significance of context, and the extent to which any cross-country comparisons can be meaningful. Psychometric measures, such as the ERI, rely on both a universalist conception of what is human, as well as a belief in a world of mutual intelligibility. The predominance of qualitative and post-qualitative researchers amongst our group called such easy assumptions into question.

Some of the resistance was more fundamental, indicating a significant barrier to participation for one researcher.

I feel that you have all heard and acknowledged my points, but it's not going to get integrated. That's okay. I am impressed by the enthusiasm about continuing to fight for better working conditions and value of childcare providers (LU II.1284-6)

It was confronting to realise the extent of our disagreements over how best to focus our academic energies towards amelioration of early childhood workplace issues. In fact, the difference of opinion noted above meant that this researcher decided to opt out of the project not long afterwards. Nonetheless, the quote above indicates the respectful ways in which this was handled, and is another reminder of the personal and professional performances that were being negotiated even during moments of conflict.

Feeling our way

We were explicit from the outset of this process that we did not want to bracket out the emotional aspects of the research process. We were interested in trying to understand the significant affects and emotional tides of research and researcher identity. As one of the project initiators commented during the analysis of the overall data, we were all confronted with the 'strangeness of communicating online without knowing voices, faces, tones' (LC, personal communication, May '15), and this extended to mutual ignorance and curiosity around identity issues as fundamental as the gender, social class or racial heritage of our fellow researchers. One of the key emotions felt was excitement, expressing the energising sense of stepping into the unknown in such an open-ended collaboration.

I have quite an excited feeling around the richness of the project as it gathers momentum in terms of our communications with each other (M'OB II.1310-11)

I am excited and honored to be part of the process and to work with and learn from this team of scholars and activists (MB II.329-331)

...overall I continue to be excited by the ideas here and the collaborative discussion (CL II.1443-44)

There was a sense of expansiveness as the project continued, as participants learnt to trust that others would take their suggestions seriously and respectfully. Perhaps inextricably interwoven with this excitement, was the anxiety that it could provoke, acknowledging again the depths of the identity issues at stake.

I feel unsettled, slightly anxious, but very excited and enthusiastic. (JO II.48-9)

this has been very anxiety provoking for the reasons I mentioned above but also deeply interesting as a way of conversing about care work' (M'OB II.1373-4)

We wish to acknowledge this anxiety as a productive feeling, reflecting our experience of being forced out of our comfort zones as researchers and into an unknown future. Jayne's identification of it as 'unsettling' expresses a visceral

emotional geography, of movement rather than inertia. Such anxiety is common among practitioners in the ECEC field, reflecting their difficulties in negotiating the unknowability of multiple human relationships (Elfer 2013). Faria and Mollett (2014) note how as researchers such anxiety is connected to the need to gain the trust of research participants. Our own anxieties resonate with these concerns, expressing the complexity of new and unknown relationships within the team, as well as the need to build trust within a 'vacuum', lacking any familiar visual or visceral cues.

Power and Persuasion

One of the most interesting elements of the process was seeing how each of us, at different points, drew on our holdings of educational capital, and the accustomed privilege of being heard, to attempt to persuade others towards our point of view. Given the dominance of qualitative researchers within the group, it was necessary to defend the inclusion of a quantitative element in the proposed methodology.

The Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) survey is an imperfect measurement, indeed they all are, but I found it was the best going that was valid and reliable psychometrically. What I like about it is that it captures this idea of effort being greater than rewards and this is related in the occ. health literature to a range of physical and emotional health problems, so you can argue convincingly that x leads to y and have the stats to demonstrate it' (LC II.201-6)

In this attempt, Lara is drawing on the presumed appeal to policy-makers of the truth-claims that are made possible through statistics. It is an appeal to the pragmatism of the others in the group, as well as a reminder of the difficulties qualitative researchers still sometimes experience in arguing for policy change based on their necessarily more restricted data gathering.

In a similar way, Yarrow, defending the proposed 'outsider-analysis' that was questioned above, sought to explain this element of the project,

I see it as one element of the project that may intrigue reviewers and help make us more likely to get published, because of the ways we are genuinely trying to transnationalise our research.' (YA II.265-7)

This persuasion attempt draws ultimately on a narrative about the crowdedness of the academic 'marketplace', and the need for 'product differentiation' in a neoliberal world. More benignly, it could be considered an attempt to make a more compelling narrative about the research, capturing that widespread human desire for fascinating stories.

Other attempts were more direct, such as this questioning of the desire by one participant to widen the study to include parents and family member views,

I did comment on this in my reflection because the idea is important, I just don't know if it is for "now" and for this study. (CL II.841-2)

Although this is transparent in the desire not to include such an element, it is notable that the suggestion is still acknowledged as valuable, and merely sidelined 'temporarily' rather than completely dismissed.

One of the more powerful forms of persuasion drew on the presumed desires of those within the ECEC field.

Traditional academics will hear the labor-centered logic but I think providers are fighting for a more holistic understanding of their labor. Not to romanticize but there is a "calling" involved in doing childcare labor. I think we need to keep paying attention to intersection not ranking/competing stakeholders (LU II.1016-9)

The power in such an attempt derives from our shared research in this area, and our awareness that all of the project participants are activists for the rights and needs of the workforce. These attempts to persuade were all part of the respectful but still inevitable power struggle over the potential methodological outcomes from this project, and the collective practices we might adopt as we negotiated and realigned our strategies.

Realignment

One of the most significant realignments was the shift towards considering more post-qualitative practices, compared to the more orthodox approach of the initial provocation. Earlier we discussed the resistance that everyone felt in having to challenge their existing models of practice, especially the project initiators. This was despite alternative suggestions being made carefully and thoughtfully in most cases;

'I'm not for a second suggesting that the lines and modes of enquiry already proposed shouldn't form the basis of the study - but working a post-humanist mode of diffractive enquiry integrally throughout the entire study could produce exciting and unanticipated generative possibilities...' (JO II.1274-7)

For those less invested in the proposed methodology, this opening up of new terrain was not threatening. For some this allowed discursive space to argue for some of their own methodological passions to come through, such as Margaret's interest in community-based participatory research;

...the potential to include CBPR practices also fits well with Jayne's focus and paper on charting new pathways in ECE research (MB II.328-9)

These threads often generated new ideas, such as the notion of a practitioner reference group, paralleling and supporting the research group.

Others more directly responded to the post-qualitative suggestions, describing the possibilities they could see in such practices;

Jayne suggested we might consider other forms of data gathering in terms of truth value, I take her point, for me this image is data on the academy and its view of early care providers and its workforce (M'OB II.495-7)

The image in question was a classically-gendered early childhood photo of a group of women being lectured to by a male expert, and was viewed by Maeve as a potential photo-elicitation tool in interviews with practitioners. In this way the original ideas changed and expanded, with some new ideas taking hold on the collective imagination.

This particular idea provoked other thoughts about how such artefacts might be used to engage interest in and opinions about this research area;

In thinking about [these] post-humanist options... if we can do this in a way that workers express their voice/emotions rather than we ourselves collecting artifacts, that might be an approach that addresses the idea to generate data from the workforce. In comments above I suggested asking them if they would provide an artifact that represents their experience as workers in ECE (a picture, an art object, a poem, etc.). (CL II.1410-4)

Connie's long experience in this field as a practitioner makes her particularly aware of the ethics of engaging with what remains a highly marginalised workforce.

This opening up of ideas allowed for re-evaluation by the project initiators, so that other possibilities were sparked by the ongoing dialogue. For example, the quantitative component was reconsidered in light of discussions around the constraints of particular contexts, such as geographically large or populous countries, or in response to alternate methods encountered within parallel research in other disciplines.

I have had an alternative idea though. I am thinking about using national longitudinal datasets that may be available in each country to avoid the issue of us having to distribute and collect a survey. (LC II.224-6)

Lara reconsiders here the possible uses of the ERI instrument, and wonders whether existing data might offer richer possibilities for the project long term.

Discussion

The data above outline some of the complexities of the journey that we undertook together in aiming to implement parallel methodological processes in different national contexts. We encountered complex feelings, many of which caused us to reflect on our professional identities. Our investments in our existing practices caused some resistance, and many attempts at persuasion, and then in the end, a significant realignment of the project.

In trying to understand this process, we have found useful the ideas of Suchman, and in particular her notion of *configuration*. As she argues,

'[t]aking configuration as a method assemblage means recognizing the contingency and incompleteness of artefacts as irremediable...both in terms of a system's description... and of its implementation' (2012, 56).

The artefact we began with was not a physical object, but a conceptual one - the methodological provocation crafted by the project initiators. We recognise in Suchman's description our emerging realisation that the artefact itself was not complete or inviolable, but was subject to change in its implementation, as will all methodological practices in the immediacy of real-world settings, even without an explicit dialogic process.

It was this attempt to implement our artefact that led to change within the group and a meta-method that was more about the process of collaboration than pinpointing a particular methodological product.

The idea that each researcher will pursue their areas of interest as described in the publication section below is intriguing. This would be a way for each to engage in theorizing on a deeper level in ways we may not otherwise consider (CL II.906-8)

We began to realise that our different methodological practices, which seem integral to our academic identities, may be an asset rather than an impediment to the project we are engaged in.

This collectivisation was particularly apparent in participants' final reflections and the move into more explicit analysis. Comments like these became more common;

'The process is to me as interesting as the potential research.' (CL I.1230)

I also really like the dialogic methodology that is emerging (JO II.1248-9)

It has been a process of getting to know you all over the emails and the googles... when I am by default a face to face interactor, my colleagues say my hands do the talking for me...But I do feel I have quite a sense of this group and it has been so worthwhile engaging in these generous and passionate exchanges. (M'OB II.1375-9)

This process was a genuinely affecting one, as Maeve's comment acknowledged, with all of us becoming entangled in the process of this dialogue; in relationships, but also in the project itself. We arrived at a point of realisation; that the issue is not whether we 'use' the same methodology, but rather that we are all becoming incorporated, as researchers, into a collective 'sociomaterial assemblage that comprises a functioning [research] machine' (Suchman 2012, 56).

The scary and exciting thing is that becoming part of this machine means letting go of some of the certainties we ordinarily welcome in our individual research projects, as well as embracing the entwined presence/absence that comes from an ongoing critical engagement with equally-invested researchers (Law 2004). We have been engaged in;

'negotiating the creation of new, partially-shared imaginaries without – and this is crucial – relying on one homogenizing translation into a dominant party's terms' (Suchman 2012, 52, emphasis in original)

As the project initiators, Lara and Yarrow were forced to acknowledge their own dominance in the process, and the homogenisation that they had assumed would

occur, even if this is not how they visualised their role initially. As Lara suggested early on in the process,

I am hoping that we can draw together similarities and differences in experiences of working in child care/early education and care and the ways that people feel valued and/or devalued to tell broader stories about what matters in this arena (LC II.130-132)

This insight enabled a re-evaluation of our initial idealism, particularly the ‘drawing together’ mentioned above. This had the potential to produce homogenisation, but also expresses a hope for collective action. We were forced to acknowledge in various ways the inescapability of power-relations even within a project envisaged as feminist, egalitarian, and non-hierarchical, and our continuing responsibilities to entangled others (St. Pierre 2013, 655).

Conclusion

As in many aspects of research, where we arrived was not the destination we had imagined. What was viewed initially as a process of methodological alignment turned out to be something more profound, a collaboration which accepted differences rather than attempting to erase them. We realised that what had emerged was a research collective, committed to expanding the limited notions of cooperation that currently exist within academic work. Again, Suchman’s work proves helpful;

‘An orientation to configuration reminds us to reanimate the figures that populate our socio-material imaginaries and practices, to examine the relations that they hold in place and the labours that sustain them, and to articulate the material semiotic reconfigurations required for their transformation.’ (2012, 58)

We believe that we experienced in this dialogic process a new way of ‘being’ academic, in which the image of the ivory tower makes way for an expansive vision of community.

We came together as a result of our shared goals about improving the lives of those in the early childhood workforce, locally and globally. We now believe that doing this may not require that we collapse our individual research skills and imaginations into one homogenous project, in the ways we envisaged originally. Instead our dialogue and engagement enabled a cooperative process that transformed this single project into a much richer and multifaceted set of research processes. These processes will build up explicitly, and asynchronously, into a combined understanding of the policy challenges that must be faced, and local remedies that might be applied, to change materially and emotionally the lives of early childhood workers. This resonates with Pulkkinen’s (2015) comments about the critical place of intervention, of an activist sensibility, within the ‘transdisciplinary discipline’ of feminist academic work.

While we do not claim this is the only way to do feminist work in the academy, we believe this notion of cooperation – of research configurations – offers a powerful

challenge to the atomisation and competition currently existing within many research settings. Powerful discourses are always shaping a sense of not just what is possible to research, but also *how* we are expected to research it. We were reminded of this while presenting on this project at a recent conference (Andrew et al. 2015), when challenged by a colleague firmly invested in positivist approaches to studying gender to answer, ‘How is *this* research?’ We answer such a question by suggesting that better research may come from challenging the isolating and alienating conditions in which this is done, as well as the fixed paradigms within which research is understood (Lather and St. Pierre 2013). We suspect that these serve the needs of the elite of the academic hierarchy and not those academic workers at the base, with their high teaching loads and insecure tenure.

We argue that this dialogic process offers a model for researchers in areas beyond our particular research interests – the early childhood workforce – and for those with different research values or practices. What the post-qualitative imaginary offers is a vision of research where multiple methods (longitudinal, large-scale survey, in-depth interview, practitioner engagement, photo-elicitation, etc.) are brought together to offer insight into specific research concerns. Instead of building on each other’s research more traditionally (through citation or review), we suggest that activist academics form explicit cooperatives on a global scale, breaking down barriers that prevent us from learning from and working meaningfully with each other.

We end this paper with some questions, and some challenges. How does our collectivity express entanglement, as researchers, so that we cease being unitary subjects? How might this entanglement grow and accrete, rhizomatically, engaging new researchers, practitioners and perhaps policy-makers as well? What more-than-human entities participate in this collective, exerting their subtle but persuasive agency on our practices? How do email, cloud-based collaboration, and the various tools we habitually use, move and shift us in ways unanticipated within a narrow humanist frame? How do the emotions and bodies so ‘foreign’ to orthodox research reshape our researcher subjectivities, making such collaborations live, and sing, and dance?

Will you dance with us?

¹ Although our aim is to make this an inclusive global project, we must acknowledge that all the current participants are from economically-privileged countries, and are native English speakers. Our analysis may be limited by these forms of academic privilege.

² We used GoogleDocs, although any similar document sharing application would be effective, in managing scattered and asynchronous data gathering.

³ Interestingly, mirroring the structure of the ERI, the quantitative instrument proposed in the methodological provocation.

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