Opening up possibilities through team research: an investigation of infants’ lives in early childhood education settings

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Abstract
This article contributes to the still small corpus of scholarship about team research through a brief literature review and a case study that aims to provide insights into knowledge production within the context of a research team. In mapping theoretical–methodological shifts in the author’s understandings of the (im)possibilities of an investigation of infants’ lives in early education settings, it describes a form of ‘becoming’ that offers possibilities for transcending the often instrumentalist drivers of team research.

Keywords
child care, Deleuze, early childhood education, Foucault, infants, infants’ experiences, Infants’ Lives in Childcare project, research teams, team research

Introduction
The demands of the global knowledge economy and concomitant drive for competitive advantage in knowledge production and exchange have generated a growing impetus for structural change in the organisation of research. One manifestation has been the increasing emphasis on the establishment of research teams (Massey et al., 2006). This trend is evident even in fields traditionally the domain of sole qualitative researchers (Ritchie and Rigano, 2007) and in relatively new fields, such as educational research, where in many contexts, including Australia, much of the research undertaken is small scale, qualitative and unfunded (Cumming, 2010). From a knowledge economy perspective, research teams are said to enable a concentration of resources and optimisation of research effort. Team research, therefore, is presumed an effective and strategic response...
to multiple policy and institutional concerns: the efficient allocation of scarce research resources, the renewal of academic workforces, improving positioning in national and international ‘league tables’ and in the building of a cumulative evidence base to inform efforts to enhance human capital development and national productivity by addressing complex and interrelated social, health, educational, economic and environmental problems (Cheek, 2008; Creese et al., 2008). In ‘scientific’ disciplines, there has been ongoing interest in the productivity of research teams and other facets of their performance (e.g. Van der Weijden et al., 2008). Yet, in fields where team research has not been the norm, the literature remains surprisingly sparse (Curry et al., 2011). My aim in this article is to contribute to that literature through a brief literature review and case study.

In this article, the term ‘team research’ refers to groups of researchers working together on one or more funded research projects and who self-identify as a research team or group. While an array of terms (e.g. collaborative research, team ethnography) is used in the literature reviewed, all convey researchers pooling their energies, time, ideas and expertise and taking at least some degree of joint responsibility for the completion of the project. Research interest groups (such as reading groups), and organisational units (such as university research centres) are not the focus of the article, nor are more loosely connected research networks, such as those designed primarily to support collaboration in research capacity building or to promote inter-institutional alliances, or in which each researcher or research group has sourced their own funding, thus enabling them to maintain a degree of independence.1

The article comprises two parts. To set the context for the case study, I briefly review literature about team research, primarily focussing on educational and other social science research fields where it has not been customary. I identify two gaps that in my view particularly warrant attention: the lack of connectedness, for the most part, to broader analyses and critiques of political, policy and economic contexts, notably, the global knowledge economy, and a paucity of detailed accounts that provide insights into knowledge production within the context of team research. In the second part of the article, I begin to address the latter through a case study of how interdisciplinary team research ‘added value’, in the form of theoretical–methodological richness, to an investigation of infants’ lives in early childhood education settings.

**Team research: a brief review of the literature**

**Benefits, challenges and strategies**

For the past 40 or so years, the still relatively small body of literature about team research in social sciences and equivalent fields has tended to focus on its perceived advantages and disadvantages, the thorny challenges it can present and strategies for resolving them. As is widely noted (e.g. Lingard et al., 2007; Ritchie and Rigano, 2007), the prevailing wisdom is that team research provides many benefits. In addition to those already mentioned, benefits include greater reach, scale, potential generalizability and, hence, visibility to policymakers than what is generally possible for a sole researcher; the pooling of perspectives and expertise required to address complex social problems; efficient division of labour; analytic richness and rigour and opportunities for senior researchers to
mentor less experienced colleagues, and for the professional growth of team members more generally. Yet, the literature also highlights many potential difficulties associated with team research.

Three decades ago, for example, Bradley (1982) identified endemic ethical problems and underlying structural conditions that give rise to them, and proposed an agenda for their resolution. Liggett et al. (1994) continued in this vein by mapping the challenges of working as a team of qualitative educational researchers in a large multi-site project and reflecting on the lessons learned. More recently, Rogers-Dillon (2005: 439) provided a research assistant’s perspective on the ‘unvarnished realities’ of power relations in a hierarchically structured qualitative research team, while Massey et al. (2006) focused on challenges arising from differences in disciplinary perspectives and knowledge bases in a multidisciplinary team. Woods et al.’s (2000) account of the benefits of collaboration for their educational research team, however, is markedly more positive. They attributed their success, in part, to the federated structure of their team that enabled a balance of individual and group pursuits.

Several cautiously optimistic accounts elaborate on specific strategies for addressing commonly reported challenges. Barry et al. (1999), for example, discuss tools used to promote reflexivity within their interdisciplinary research team. Lingard et al. (2007) also emphasise the importance of fostering reflexivity, especially in relation to the politics of identity and knowledge production. In reporting on their small-scale investigation of successful research collaborations, Ritchie and Rigano (2007) highlight the ‘solidarity’ arising from the formation of emotional and relational bonds between various team members and advocate mentoring as a means of fostering solidarity. Curry et al. (2011) offer a set of guiding principles to foster positive group dynamics, while Woods et al. (2000) outline broader team structures and processes that worked successfully for their team. To capitalise on the diverse backgrounds and expertise of their educational research team, Wasser and Bresler (1996) developed the notion of an interpretive zone to facilitate ‘collective interpretative processes’ (p. 13). Gerstl-Pepin and Gunzenhauser (2002) subsequently endeavoured to work with this notion, albeit with limited success because of tensions they attributed to differences among team members in their epistemological perspectives, and class/race identities and positionings.

In short, as Mountz et al. (2003) conclude, team research and the collaboration required ‘both enhances and complicates the process of knowledge creation’ (p. 32). They refer, in particular, to complications arising from differences:

… embedded in relationships formed across cloudy fields of power influenced but not exhausted by sex, age, professional rank, language ability, institutional affiliation, job status, access to resources, time and manner of entry into the project, and research and life experiences. (p. 32)

Epistemological and disciplinary differences also warrant inclusion in such a list (see, especially, Massey et al., 2006; Lingard et al., 2007). Interestingly, on the whole, these complications appear to be framed mostly as distractions, frustrations or problems, rather than as a ‘productive asset’ (Mountz et al., 2003: 30). Indeed, with notable exceptions (e.g. Creese et al., 2008; Ritchie and Rigano, 2007; Woods et al., 2000), the tone in much of the literature is decidedly ambivalent about the net gains of team research.
Gaps

Perhaps because of the focus on the internal politics of team research, especially in relation to identity, epistemologies and fieldwork (Gerstl-Pepin and Gunzenhauser, 2002; Greckhamer et al., 2008; Lingard et al., 2007; Massey et al., 2006; Mountz et al., 2003), relatively scant attention is paid to how broader geopolitical–economic contexts, such as the global knowledge economy, shape team research. This oversight is surprising given the proliferation of analyses of the nature, dynamics and implications of these changing contexts for research more broadly (e.g. Fenwick and Farrell, 2012; May and Perry, 2011; Somekh and Schwandt, 2007). There are exceptions, for instance, Cheek’s (2008) discussion of the implications for collaborative research of the politics of evidence within the broader research and policy landscape. Nevertheless, this gap warrants addressing.

A second gap, and the focus of this article, concerns the widely claimed synergies that accrue through team research, enabling greater conceptual and/or analytic richness or depth than are generally achievable by sole researchers, and thus, adding value to the research endeavour. Yet the literature provides surprisingly few examples of how added depth is achieved (or constrained) – a point well made by Wasser and Bresler (1996) when lamenting the lack of ‘thick descriptions and analyses of the interpretative processes of qualitative research teams’ (p. 8). With notable exceptions (e.g. Creese et al., 2008; MacLure et al., 2010), still pertinent today. Wasser and Bresler (1996) go on to provide one of the more detailed accounts of adding value through collaboration, describing diverse professional, personal and research concerns that members of their educational research team brought to their discussions of fieldwork. They note that those differences ‘helped us to understand the complexity of what we thought we believed and what we thought we were seeing at the sites’ (p. 10) but do not give specific examples of how those discussions enabled more complex understandings. MacLure et al. (2010) and Creese et al. (2008) make valuable contributions to addressing this lacuna. The former describe the complementary conceptual and analytic contributions of their group of ethnographers to the creation of an experimental video that sought to interrupt the ‘banality’ of their naturalistic video footage; the latter describe how the collective layering of the field notes of individual researchers enabled the research team to increase interpretive depth.

In contrast, and on a salutary note, Gerstl-Pepin and Gunzenhauser (2002) conclude that their experience of collaborative research led to more fragmented rather than more in-depth interpretations, while creating an illusion of greater understanding. More generally, Greckhamer et al. (2008) contend that labelling a collaboration ‘interdisciplinary’ can add to the perceived standing of the research while in practice reproducing disciplinary divides that, in turn, limit scope for conceptual, theoretical and methodological complexity and, hence, the generation of new insights. Given the structural shifts towards team research arising from the demands of the global knowledge economy, along with accusations that managerialist responses to those demands are impoverishing scholarly work (Lea, 2011), a salient question for ongoing investigation, therefore, is ‘How, under what conditions, and according to whose judgement does team research enhance and constrain scholarly enquiry?’ As a contribution to this broader investigation, the following case study aims to shine some light onto knowledge production within the context of team research in the Infants’ Lives in Childcare project.
Enhancing scholarly enquiry through Team research: a case study

Context

The case study concerns an interdisciplinary research team in a multi-campus regional Australian university. The team was formed in response to the university’s emphasis on building research concentrations, in part, to position itself strategically for the first round of Australia’s research assessment exercise (for an extended discussion, see Sumsion, 2011). It initially comprised six chief investigators: three full professors, an associate professor and two senior lecturers, one of whom was a retired adjunct, with respective disciplinary backgrounds in early childhood education, psychology, social policy and speech pathology. Soon after its formation, our research team was awarded Australian Research Council funding (Sumsion et al., 2008–2011) to investigate how infants experience their lives in early childhood education settings, as far as possible from the perspectives of the infants themselves. Subsequently, three doctoral students joined the project, bringing the total number of researchers to nine.

In a number of ways, the structure and operation of the team could be described as hierarchical (Rogers-Dillon, 2005) or vertically structured (Ritchie and Rigano, 2007). The doctoral students have undertaken the fieldwork, as well as considerable responsibility for resolving the many unanticipated and substantial technical problems encountered with video equipment and data analysis software. In practice, however, the tone is markedly collegial, at least from my perspective as team leader. There is palpable respect for the different disciplinary backgrounds, expertise and interests of individual team members, and intellectual curiosity about the diversity of theoretical, conceptual and methodological resources they have brought to or developed during the project.

With the team scattered geographically over hundreds of kilometres, opportunities for face-to-face meetings have been limited to two or three occasions each year. Meetings mostly focus on the sharing and discussion of data, and the planning of publications, along with ongoing discussion about how to resolve logistical and technological problems, including those associated with sharing large video-data files. Like Mountz et al. (2003), we had underestimated the effects of distance on the day-to-day functioning of the team. Between face-to-face meetings, momentum is sustained primarily by various combinations of team members pursuing a particular interest, analysing a specific segment of data or working towards a publication, along the lines of a federation of researchers described by Woods et al. (2000). As Ritchie and Rigano (2007) and Mountz et al. (2003) also found, the intensity, nature and extent of different team members’ involvement has varied over time; however, the ebb and flow of involvement has not undermined the strong collegial ethos. That ethos has been a crucial foundation and impetus for the rich scholarly enquiry that has characterised the work of the team.

An individual ‘take’ on a collective journey

Too often, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue, such enquiry is revealed only in its ‘finished state’ with the brush strokes – ‘the touching and retouching’ (p. 219) – rendered indiscernible in the reporting of the research. Instead, they advocate presenting one’s research as a process of exposure: ‘… in which you expose yourself, you take risks’, a
process of making public ‘muddled, cloudy’ thinking in all ‘its fermenting confusion’ (original emphasis; p. 219). In the remainder of this article, I aim to make visible those brush strokes with respect to my experience of the *Infants Lives in Childcare* project and the scholarly journey afforded me as a member of the research team. As each member of our team has experienced the journey differently, conveying the commonalities and idiosyncrasies calls for a mix of collective and individual representations. However, our various representations of our respective journeys (e.g. Elwick et al., 2012, in press a), informed by different disciplinary interests, theorising and world views, all portray a stretching towards greater theoretical, conceptual, interpretative and/or methodological complexity. In this way, we have opened ourselves to new possibilities for understanding infants’ experiences of their early childhood education settings. The opening up and taking up of those possibilities, I maintain, is directly attributable to the synergies of the team: exposure to previously unfamiliar theories and methods; robust discussion concerning their relevance, application and implications; deliberations over philosophical and ethical issues and resultant challenges to our accustomed ways of thinking.

For many of us in the team, the journey could be summed up as one of grappling with the possibilities of the (im)possible task (Green, 2010) of understanding infants’ experiences from their perspective, given that they are unable to convey verbally the nature of those experiences and the meaning they make of them (Elwick et al., 2012, in press). In Green’s (2010) words, it has been a process of reaching into ‘the realm of the unknown, [and] into otherness’ (p. 8), while appreciating the uncertainties, indeterminacies and ultimately ‘unfinishable’ (p. 6, original emphasis) nature of that task. In sketching the contours of my reaching into the unknown and otherness, I take a genealogical approach informed by Foucault, and by Deleuze’s concepts of lines, strata and folds. Before proceeding with the case study, I pause briefly to explain my interpretation of these concepts within the context of the *Infants’ Lives in Childcare* project.

**Genealogy**

Foucault (1984) is concerned with the genealogy of problems. In the *Infants’ Lives in Childcare* project, we have had to negotiate an ongoing array of technical, epistemological and ethical problems, as well as the dangers inherent in endeavouring to resolve them. Our problems are of a different kind and scale to those that concerned Foucault. Nevertheless, his emphasis on tracing ‘the multiple beginnings, sudden lurches forwards, pauses and gaps’ (Danaher et al., 2000: 100) and on history unfolding not in ‘an orderly, continuous, linear manner’ but in ‘an ongoing chaotic struggle between different possibilities’ (Danaher et al., 2000: 101) serves as a useful point of departure for reflexively examining our efforts to grapple with the (im)possibilities of our project.

Foucault (1984) outlines three domains of genealogy:

First, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truths, through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge; second, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power, through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others; third, a historical ontology in relation to ethics, through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents. (p. 351)
These domains collectively encompass many of the concerns about truth, knowledge, subjectification, power and ethics that have confronted us in the *Infants' Lives in Childcare Project*. While often intensely discomforting, they have offered new lines of possibility.

**Lines.** Deleuze (1995) sees different kinds of lines permeating and marking out all facets of our lives and undertakings, including lines that delineate the possible/impossible. Indeed, he asserts that responding creatively to challenges involves ‘tracing a path between impossibilities’ (p. 133). Moreover, he contends, we can find such paths and ‘ride such lines whenever we think bewilderingly enough’ (p. 111). I take this to mean that through sustained critical and creative engagement, we can expand the possibilities of the (im)possibility of knowing infants’ perspectives. Deleuze (1995) elaborates,

We need to both cross the line, and make it endurable, workable, thinkable. To find in it as far as possible … an art of living [researching]. How can we protect ourselves, survive, while still confronting this line? Here a frequent theme of Foucault’s comes in: we have to manage to fold the line and establish an endurable zone in which to install ourselves, confront things, take hold, breathe – in short, think. Bending the line so we manage to live [research] upon it, with it … (p. 111)

In tracing some of our crossing, extending, bending and generally experimenting with these lines, I focus on four shifts reflective of the ‘multiple beginnings, sudden lurches forwards, pauses and gaps’ referred to by Danaher et al. (2000: 100). In Deleuzian terms, these shifts are events, not one-off happenings, but rather confluences of multiple and ongoing forces and interactions whose reverberations create disequilibrium, challenge existing structures and give rise to new possibilities and pathways (Stagoll, 2005). Deleuze’s concepts of strata and folds help to explain how ongoing interactions between the different epistemological and ethical tensions and understandings have prompted shifts in our ongoing experimentation in the *Infants’ Lives in Childcare* project.

**Strata and folds.** Deleuze (1999) uses the concepts of strata and folds to explain what he refers to as the ‘inside of thought’ (p. 94). He depicts a line that serves as a membrane between an outer and inner surface, just as an item of clothing, such as jacket, has an outer surface and inner lining (Conley, 2005). The inner surface, or inside, consists of various strata, or sedimented layers or archives of knowledge, that accumulate incrementally over time. Each stratum has its respective suppositions, propositions, ‘codes and rules’ (Deleuze, 1999: 94). These strata are not static but rather fold into each other, just as when cooking different ingredients can be folded into a mixture (Gale, 2007): ‘they have the task of continually producing levels that force something new to be seen or said’ (Deleuze, 1999: 120). The outside lies beyond the strata, beyond the limits of the knowable, beyond articulation, its unchartered dimensions a ‘shadowy, anonymous unthought’ (Bogue, 2004: 56). While ‘the chaos’ of the unknown (outside) can threaten the coherence of the known (inside), interactions between the known and unknown/unknowable can also generate new possibilities (Bogue, 2004: 6). From the outset of the *Infants’ Lives in Childcare Project*, we have tried to work across different strata of knowledge, bending the lines between them and folding in elements from different
strata. More recently, some of us have increasingly turned to working the lines between the knowable and unknowable.

Like Foucault, Deleuze (1999: 114) sees three interconnected preoccupations underpinning sense making – ‘knowledge, power and self’. These preoccupations give rise to particular questions:

What can I know or see and articulate in such and such a condition … What can I do, what power can I claim and what resistances may I counter? What can I be … or how can I produce myself as a subject? (p. 114)

Such questions resonate in the theoretical–methodological shifts I describe in the following.

**From the Mosaic approach to mosaic methodology**

Our original intent was to adopt Clark and Moss’ (2001) Mosaic approach where the term ‘mosaic’ conveys assembling numerous fragments of data and perspectives (of children and adults) to create a comprehensive picture (Clark, 2011). Its appeal for our research team lay in its scope for data generation through multiple methods and for data interpretation from multiple viewpoints (of researchers, educators, parents, children), in short, its focus on participatory research and co-constructed knowledge and its potential for poly-vocality, even though we recognised that inherent power relations could be problematic (Tobin and Davidson, 1990).

What the Mosaic approach seemed to lack, however, was an emphasis on bringing together diverse disciplinary and theoretical perspectives into productive dialogue. We knew that our accustomed perspectives and resources, employed in their usual ways, would be inadequate for the demands of the project. We wanted, therefore, to unsettle, ‘to offend and interrupt’ our habitual ways of thinking and the disciplinary truths they reflected and to create opportunities for ‘productive interference’ (MacLure, 2010: 277). To distinguish our interest in theoretical eclecticism, we adopted the term ‘mosaic methodology’.

Our notion of mosaic methodology was similar to Kincheloe’s (2001, 2005) notion of bricolage. Derived from Lévi-Strauss’ (1966) use of bricoleur to describe a handyperson who makes use of many tools, bricolage also entails bringing together diverse methods of enquiry and diverse philosophical and theoretical perspectives (Kincheloe, 2001). But in contrast to Kincheloe and Berry (2004), who provide detailed guidance concerning bricolage, we were uncertain about how we might make the most productive use of theoretical eclecticism.

Initially, our intent was simply to draw variously on our collective resources to ask ‘sensitising questions’, informed by diverse theoretical perspectives, of data generated through a variety of participatory methods (see Sumsion et al., 2011 for more detail). For example, from interpretivist perspectives, we asked ourselves: What seemed important to these infants. What did they enjoy? What bothered them? Drawing on developmental psychology, we wondered about how they managed separating from their parents and forming relationships with educators. From critical theory perspectives, we were interested in the strategies of resistance they used and encountered. From
phenomenological perspectives, we were curious about their actions and intent. From sociocultural perspectives, we pondered on their contributions to co-constructing the culture of the early childhood setting, and from intersubjectivity perspectives, we pondered on their relationships and conversations with each other (Sumsion et al., 2011). We assumed that the more ‘perspectival variety’ we employed, the more we could avoid ‘one-sided reductionism’ (Kincheloe, 2001: 682) and the richer and more illuminating our insights were likely to be.

In practice, however, the exigencies of distance and the technical difficulties associated with sharing large video files have tended to lead to individuals and small groups interpreting segments of video-data from their accustomed theoretical perspectives. As team members, individually or in small groups, apply different theoretical frames and tools, we have started to accumulate and overlay multiple interpretations (Sumsion and Goodfellow, 2012). Increasingly, through bending and folding across different strata of knowledge (Deleuze, 1999), we have come to recognise the polysemy (same words but different meanings in different theoretical traditions) and inter-textuality (narratives attaining meaning through connections with other narratives) of our interpretations (Kincheloe and Berry, 2004), especially when endeavouring to conceptualise and describe infants’ relations with others.

We have become increasingly conscious, as well, of what is permissible to speak, write and think about from within different theoretical perspectives; the boundaries between the (un)acceptable and questions concerning what knowledge is most valued, acceptable and dangerous in what contexts, and when used for what purposes. A particular point of contention has been the politics and ethics of interpretations and representations that could invite criticism of the practices of some of the educators who generously agreed to participate in the study.

Yet, on the whole, in my view, our use of mosaic methodology has had limited effect in fundamentally challenging our interpretations, or the theoretical frames and tools that have generated them. Rather, I suggest, for the most part, the experience of using mosaic methodologically has not only enriched but also sedimented, in the sense of confirming, existing (historical) truths that, respectively, we have held about knowledge, and about ourselves as ethical producers of knowledge (Deleuze, 1999).

Epistemological ruptures

Nevertheless, some significant ruptures to the fluency of our interpretative narratives (Rose, 1999) have occurred, generally, when we have been able to meet together as a team for sustained immersion in and discussion of data. One of the most significant ruptures has been the realisation that no matter how skilled we might become at bringing different theoretical perspectives into dialogue, or how sophisticated our grasp of theoretical and methodological resources, enriching our own perspectives does not necessarily bring us closer to infants’ perspectives (Elwick et al., 2012). Indeed, it can reinforce our positioning of ourselves as knowers and of infants as the objects of our knowing. This realisation has challenged our assumptions that through dextrous epistemological manoeuvring, we would find a way to transcend the researcher–infant divide and to understand the meanings infants make of their experiences.
For some of us then, the focus shifted to trying to find ways of enabling infants to disrupt our pre-determined categories of understanding, meanings, and expectations (Elwick et al., 2012) and of becoming more receptive to infants’ interjections. These endeavours have created further epistemological and ethical challenges: for instance, how to avoid projecting on to infants the emotions we experience when viewing video-data of the infants in their early childhood education setting, particularly empathy with or concern about what we may perceive as injustices. Should we have been more tentative, for example, in assuming that an infant’s experience of long periods alone in a ‘playpen’ (Elwick et al., in press) was one of physical and social isolation? Increasingly conscious of wanting to avoid responding in ways that impede ‘listening’ to infants (Clark and Moss, 2001), we have employed strategies such as viewing data multiple times, noting our reactions to each viewing and trying to challenge our initial emotional responses so that we create space for infants to interject. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to avoid projecting on to infants our emotions, although we know that in doing so, we are likely rendering ourselves less, rather than more, receptive to what the infants themselves may want to convey. This rupture marked a radical shift from a primarily epistemological focus on knowing infants to a primarily ethical concern (Elwick et al., 2012), a shift that prompted, for me, a (temporary) turn to feminist standpoint theory.

Turning to feminist standpoint theory

Feminist standpoint theory aims to highlight the perspectives of marginalised voices (Harding, 2003). It begins ‘at the strange, at the margin, with the excluded and the voiceless … [as] the richest and primary entry point toward understanding the whole’ (Houle, 2009: 175). Seen by many as an explicitly democratic project, feminist standpoint theory seemed consistent, therefore, with our intent to understand infants’ experiences through accessing the ‘voices’ of the infants themselves.

Houle (2009) cautions, however, that endeavours to generate ‘responsible knowledge’ – and here I want to include ethical knowledge – through ‘better knowing’ (original emphasis) the stranger (the infant) can have inadvertent and unhelpful consequences (p. 173). Indeed, Houle (2009) challenges us to reconsider our motives in seeking infants’ perspectives, raising difficult questions about how we construct ourselves as moral subject and agents, and the power relations in which we engage to produce truths. She prompts us to consider, for example,

What exactly does it mean, though, for an ‘us’ to need a ‘them’ to speak to us, with us; to show themselves to us? What does it reveal about the powers of exclusion and inclusion we have, exercise and preserve, that we are able to need, even demand, this inclusivity? What kind of an offer is the offer of hospitality initiated by us and extended toward the stranger, to her strangeness – and not for the sake of that strangeness but, in the end, for what is dear to us: justice and truth as we ourselves names and envisioned these? Is this an unambiguously caring gesture, a welcoming? Or, is the invitation … a kind of hostage-taking prior to any consultation with the hostages? (original emphasis). (Houle, 2009: 177)
In other words, albeit the well-meaning intent of promoting infants’ participation rights, are we seeking to colonise or domesticate the infant participants in our project – especially in our use of ‘baby-cam’, a small headband-mounted camera worn by assenting infants for short periods, in the hope of ‘seeing’ through their eyes (Sumson et al., 2011)? Houle (2009) goes on to remind us that domesticating difference can have the effect of driving out of ‘sight and sound’ the ‘truly valuable and truly challenging modes of strangeness’ (p. 178). Rather than advancing the democratic project, she argues that such endeavours can have the ‘feel of imperialism’ (p. 177).

A further concern associated with a feminist standpoint perspective, according to Houle (2009), is the ‘basic working presumption of transferability across the strange and the familiar’ (p. 178). She challenges us to think about what language we plan to use to enable us, as researchers, and infants to speak together. If it is our language, then how can we avoid simply augmenting the ‘already familiar’ (Houle, 2009: 178), or what we already think we know? Despite our best intentions to create spaces in which we might become more receptive to infants in ways that make their interjections more visible and therefore, come to better ‘know’ them and the meaning they make of their experiences, are we nevertheless reinforcing traditional infant–adult divides and power relations? In seeking to keep alive the hope of creating transformative interpretive spaces (Elwick et al., 2012) through an ethical stance grounded in epistemological humility, are we simply indulging in ‘an impossible fantasy’ (Houle, 2009: 180)? Not necessarily, contends Houle (2009: 181), as long as we shift our way of thinking, and not just what we think about.

A key to changing our way of thinking, it seemed, could be to relinquish, at least partially, our preoccupation with, and drive to transcend, the researcher–infant divide. By decentring ourselves and the infants whose perspectives we wanted to understand, might we find different interpretative spaces of the kind to which Houle (2009) alludes? Primarily as a way of destabilizing the researcher–infant duality, some members of our team then turned to the seductive possibilities of relational materiality.

**Relational materiality and assemblage**

Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) use the term ‘relational materiality’ to challenge the habitual privileging of ‘humanness’ or ‘the error of believing that the proper perspective of understanding the world … [centres] on the viewpoint of the human subject’ (May, 2005: 24). From a relational materiality perspective, the world consists of dynamic and iterative processes of ‘intra-activity’ between human and non-humans (Barad, 2007). Material objects and practices, like humans, are seen to ‘perform actions, produce effects and alter situations’ (Bennett, 2004: 528). Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of assemblage particularly appealed to several of us. In conveying a continually emerging arrangement of heterogeneous elements, including the human, non-human, animate and inanimate, it provided a way of disrupting the binaries – adult/infant, researcher/researched, self/other and subject/object – implicated in our searching for possibilities for coming to know infants’ perspectives. Assemblage bears some similarity to the
notion of collage (Marcus and Saka, 2006), and hence links back to (or folds into, as Deleuze might say) our original interest in constructing a mosaic of understandings of infants’ experiences in early childhood settings. Its emphasis on instability and its refusal to privilege human actors, however, sets it apart from our theoretical–methodological stances earlier in the project. In decentring researchers and infants, assemblage to some extent defused the epistemological and ethical concerns that had increasingly come to preoccupy us (Bradley et al., 2012). It has enabled a shifting away from our earlier striving to construct an authentic picture of infants’ perspectives. Rather than continuing to dwell on the inevitable inadequacies of our theoretical–methodological resources and the ethical dubiousness of presuming to fully know infants’ lives, it has focused our attention instead on ‘the circumstances in which things happen’ (Deleuze, 1995: 25). Researcher and infant are no longer centre stage but parts of diverse groupings of heterogeneous elements.

Take, for example, meal time, the focus of quite a lot of our data. From a relational material perspective, meal time becomes an assemblage of infants, the high chairs in which they are seated, the varying distances between the high chairs, the interactions between the infants as they sit in their high chairs and the pleasure they obtain from those interactions. The trays attached to the high chairs, the infants’ drink bottles, the sunken part of the high chair tray designed to hold the drink bottle, the difficulty the infants encounter in fitting the drink bottle securely into the sunken section, the unforgiving force of gravity, the noise the drink bottles make when dropped on the wooden floor and the infants’ and the carer’s reactions to the dropping of drink bottles are also part of the assemblage. So, too, is the carer herself, the meal time routines she has established; her concepts of cleanliness, nourishment and ‘acceptable’ meal time behaviour and the regulations to which she is required to adhere; and the site-based researcher, her video-camera and its overtones of surveillance (Bradley et al., 2012). This assemblage, in turn, is located within ever more complex assemblages of ‘other bodies, objects, institutions, technologies, regimes of signs and relations of power’ (Currier, 2003: 327).

A relational material perspective has added richness and complexity to our thinking about the early childhood education settings in which infants find themselves and how they might experience those settings. In broadening our focus from what seemed, in retrospect, an overly narrow focus on epistemological–(human)relational–ethical dimensions to consider the material and non-material, it has diluted the intensity of our investment in the infant–researcher duality and made us receptive to a broader range of possibilities and non-human actors and forces that play an important part in infants’ lives. It has introduced a certain humility about our limits as researchers, a humility for which we had said from the outset that we wanted to strive, but which had remained to some extent elusive.

Indeed, each of the four shifts recounted in this article, along with others that have not been reported, have heightened our appreciation of the complexity of the research undertaking and of the questions we need to continue to ask of ourselves. We continue to draw from across the different strata of knowledge and the understandings and the questions to which they give rise, knowing that further shifts will occur and that strata will continue to accumulate.
Concluding thoughts

This article has been prompted by the increasing prominence of team research on global policy agendas, the ambivalence in the literature about the net gains of team research and the scarcity of accounts providing insight into knowledge production within research teams. To this end, the article has described some of the pronounced epistemological, theoretical–methodological and ethical shifts and key events in the *Infants Lives in Childcare* project as I explored, along with my colleagues, the (im)possibilities of understanding infants’ experiences from the perspectives of the infants themselves. These and other unreported shifts and events can be mapped, in various manifestations, across the corpus of writing from the project. Although each of us in the team has encountered different shifts and experienced similar shifts differently, collectively they have had far-reaching implications. In Deleuzian terms, they can be thought of as constituting a kind of methodological becoming or a continual destabilising of interpretative approaches and understandings and the opening up of new possibilities and pathways (May, 2003). Each of us in the *Infants’ Lives in Childcare* team has travelled different pathways and so each of us has experienced a different becoming. But for all of us, and without wishing to romanticise team research or to downplay its challenges, that becoming has been possible because we have undertaken the project as a team. What, as individuals, we would have been willing to have overlooked, or to have left undisturbed, or what we may have simply not recognised as problematic, has been thrown into sharp relief because of the diverse disciplinary, theoretical and methodological perspectives and resources employed by various members of the team. With that recognition have come ethical imperatives to act on those concerns.

Admittedly, we have then acted on those concerns primarily in spontaneously formed sub-groupings with shared interests and similar epistemological perspectives, or sometimes as individuals pursuing particular passions and lines of enquiry. Perhaps those groupings could be interpreted as an implicit agreement to avoid dealing with the kinds of tensions arising from epistemological differences widely reported in the literature. Nevertheless, the fluidity of the sub-groupings, the ongoing disturbances and provocations arising from the diversity of epistemological perspectives across the team and the continual intersecting and intertwining of lines of enquiry still require us, as a team, to grapple with ongoing conceptual and methodological complexity and challenges. They demand, for example, that we consider the incommensurabilities and possibilities of bringing together portrayals of infants’ days constructed from time-use diaries, grounded in Newtonian conceptualizations of time as uniform intervals, with video footage interpreted through our understandings of Deleuzian conceptualizations of time as flow. Moreover, our shared commitment to returning to the ever-present question of ‘What, if anything, is gained?’ by employing the theoretical and methodological resources that we variously take up helps guard against epistemological, theoretical and methodological preciousness and complacency. It also generates a collective sense of expanded rhizomatic understandings as we make connections across traditional epistemological, theoretical and methodological divides, and a sensitivity to the ruptures and ‘lines of flight’ that emerge (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). In these ways, we have been able, as a team, to open up productive and transgressive interpretative spaces (Gerstl-Pepin and Gunzenhauser, 2002).
To conclude, the case study reported here highlights that, despite the often instrumentalist policy drivers underpinning the push for team research and notwithstanding the challenges reported in the literature, team research nevertheless can open up lines of rich scholarly exploration. For our team, those lines of enquiry would have been unlikely to have unfolded otherwise. While escalating calls for team research in many instances reflect instrumentalist agendas, our experience suggests that team research itself seems to hold possibilities for transcending those agendas through opening up rather than closing down rich opportunities for scholarly investigations driven by ethical concerns. Those possibilities and the conditions that support them warrant further exploration.

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Notes
1. Inevitably, lines of demarcation are somewhat blurred. For example, in British Columbia, the Consortium for Health, Intervention, Learning and Development (CHILD) Project (Goelman et al., 2011) comprised a network of approximately 50 researchers, each of whom engaged in team research in one of the 10 interlinked studies of the CHILD Project. On a larger scale, the United Kingdom’s high profile Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) coordinated a research network of 700 educational researchers (Pollard, 2010), with scope for smaller project teams to undertake team research. Furthermore, co-authorship does not necessarily mean that researchers consider themselves a team or group.

2. An earlier exception was Eisenhart and Borko (1991) who outlined how they successfully brought together anthropological and cognitive psychology perspectives.

References


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