Chapter 6
Adults Researching Pre-Schoolers in More-Than-Human Contexts:
Rethinking Ethnographer Roles in the Age of the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on their reflective conversations, the authors argue that existing educational research paradigms may be insufficient for understanding how researchers are mutually affecting, and affected by, encounters with both the human and more-than-human, as spoken of in Rautio and Jokinen, whilst engaging in ethnographic research with pre-school children. Through empirically grounded reflections in the social and material spaces of kindergartens and family homes, we aim to reflect and raise critical questions about existing educational research paradigms, focusing on: 1. The intrinsic tensions between child-centered and post-human paradigms. 2. The (in)stability of researcher identity in the Anthropocene. 3. The unique research context(s) of early childhood play. The chapter concludes by proposing for debate several new norms for the kind of 'identity work' in which researchers grappling with the emergent post-human and Anthropocentric traditions might consider engaging.

INTRODUCTION

Crutzen's (2002) thesis of the 'Anthropocene' suggests that human behaviour's influence on the earth has become so significant in recent centuries that humanity now constitutes a geological force in its own right. Many scholars are now heralding the Anthropocene as a new epoch of geological time (Zalasiewicz, Williams, Haywood, & Ellis, 2011). As the discourse of the Anthropocene gains traction across academia, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have been quick to respond, considering the fuller implications and questioning how they might most appropriately or helpfully engage with these emergent dialogues (Lövbrand et al., 2015; Dibley, 2012; Latour, 2014). Many have been quick to pick up on the relevance of the age of the Anthropocene to the ongoing nature-society debate, pointing to a further collapse in this much-critiqued binary (Dibley, 2012; Latour, 2014):

The Anthropocene […] at once announces a new epoch and a new geological agent which would make any distinction between nature and society untenable […] through technology, science and markets, the species-life of humans is now so entangled with the planet's biogeochemical systems that that life is no longer simply biological. (Dibley, 2012, p. 142)

The publication of this book represents a move towards understanding where educational research fits into this emerging picture. It asks: what are the possible implications of the Anthropocene for education research? And how might we, as scholars, interrogate our existing research paradigms with the hope of addressing issues and challenges that have appeared or intensified in the age of the Anthropocene? This chapter considers such questions in relation to a specific and ongoing conversation the authors have been mutually engaged in for some time, with regards to the practice of researching very young children's lives.

The chapter draws on data from two different ethnographic projects with pre-school children, carried out by two ethnographic researchers. Fiona and Jo met during Fiona's Econonmic and Social Research Council funded Overseas Institutional Visit to Australian Catholic University, Melbourne. The trip was partly motivated by Fiona's desire to learn more about curriculum, digital technologies and play-based learning from Professor Susan Edwards, based at the Learning Sciences Institute at ACU. Jo was also a full-time student at the Institute. Fiona had recently completed fieldwork for a research project investigating child and family practices with television and related media at home. Jo was in the final stages of writing up her fieldwork, which considered children's imaginative play with working and non-working technologies in kindergarten settings (Bird, 2017). Both studies involved attempts to negotiate access to the everyday play-worlds of pre-school children. Both

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