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Embodying the Least-Adult Role.

## *Abstract*

The aim of this paper is to emphasize physicality and embodiment in child-centred research, fieldwork and intellectual activity. It will argue research is not a separate form of action, placing the researcher in a position of epistemological privilege, but an embodied capacity developed through practical activity. This will be explored through an examination of the 'least-adult' positionality. Drawing from a large ethnographic study of primary schools in Dublin, Ireland, this paper contends the body must be put at the centre of the research process. I introduce the conceptualization of the 'passive' and 'active' body, as key components for the relational context of fieldwork. Moreover, through an engagement with phenomenology, it is argued here that knowledge production is an embodied capacity developed through a sensuous relationship with the field.

## *Introduction*

Between 2008 and 2010 I was part of a team that conducted a child-centred ethnography of seven primary schools in north inner city Dublin, Republic of Ireland (hereafter Ireland). The aim of this work was to explore interethnic relations amongst young children, within an area of high inward migration. At that time there was little work on the experiences of young children from diverse backgrounds in the Irish context. The literature that did exist suggested racism amongst children was pervasive, but hidden amongst peers and kept out of the view of teachers and other adults (Devine and Kelly 2006). For this reason, we chose to adopt a positionality known as the 'least-adult' role, a technique that encourages researchers to shed adult power and signifiers, to become as immersed in children's worlds as possible. The logic behind this method is that the researcher must be orientated towards children differently than other adults, in order to access what is often kept concealed from them. The substantive findings of this work are available elsewhere (Garratt, 2019, 2018, 2017, Curry et al 2011, Scholtz and Gilligan 2017). The focus of this article is on the ethical dilemmas and opportunities of the least-adult positionality. Specifically, this paper aims to emphasise how the somatic processes of research must be acknowledged in order to prevent implicit contentions that research exists as something other than an embodied manner of being. This will be discussed in two ways: firstly, through the physical body of the researcher, which must be used as an instrument of research and secondly, by reassessing intellectual activity as practical and engaged. To begin, this article examines the legacy of dualism in considerations of the body in social scientific thought, and its implications for child-centred methodology. To conclude, I argue there needs to be a greater sensory understanding of methodology that positions the body at its core.

## *Rethinking the Body*

To put the spotlight on the body within the research process is contentious; the social sciences are built upon the premise that bodies do not predetermine society. The body is often framed as reductionist, pre-social and in biological terms, and to insist on its importance is to risk losing academic respectability (Shilling 2008). This is so, as a duality between mind and body is the default position of social scientific thought. Tracing from Descartes' dictum 'I think therefore I am', the essence of what it is to be human is often taken to be located in a disembodied mind (Crossley, 2001). This convention has been heightened in education scholarship, as the quest to bring agency and creativity back into scrutiny of curriculum (largely through the reconceptualist movement) has led to a grounding in existentialist philosophy for many educators (Magrini 2012). Existentialism emphasises personal freedom

and responsibility, and this has translated into a greater awareness of the centrality of students' potential and creativity. Indeed, as one existentialist thinker stated, the most difficult task for educators is to learn how to let students learn (Heidegger 1951-52). However, despite overtly rejecting dualism (through an emphasis on how the individual is of the world and not separate from it), in practice existentialist thought is inconsistent in extending this to the body. For most, bodies remain characterised as a natural and conservative force that must be transcended by the mind in order to achieve enlightenment (De Beauvoir, 1972 [1946]; Sartre, 1969).

When the body has been brought into theorization, it is often as a target for further eradication. For instance, in gender studies it has become increasingly common to consider the body as rendered through gender and not the reverse (Butler 1990). This mirrors conventions within ethnic and racial studies, where the concept of racialisation has moved scholarship beyond the certainty of 'race', to questions of how and why race is constructed (Murji and Solomos 2005). Yet, while this literature has highlighted the importance of discourse within social construction, the analytic value of the body has been reduced only to how it is categorised. *Why* the body is judged is addressed, but not *how*. How is judgement operationalised and what do categories mean for individuals in practice? Through the complete subordination of the body to discourse, some have argued we have cut off useful ways to recast the body in less essentialising terms (Benhabib 1995; Rottenberg 2003). This is important with regards qualitative methodology, as the origins of this method are rooted in phenomenology, which takes a different perspective of the body.

Phenomenology is sometimes thought of as the practice of existentialism, a philosophical method of observing, recording and interpreting lived experience (Magrini 2012). Yet, it departs from this approach in its understanding of consciousness. For phenomenologists, our consciousness is structured by its relationship to phenomena and the conceptualisation of knowledge experienced through our bodies (Elliott 2004). Here categorisation is a function of our perceptions, based on habitual expectations, and developed and recreated through our sensuous experiences of the world (Husserl 1973). Thus, it is on the nature of thought that phenomenology departs from duality. For theorists such as Ryle (1946) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) the reality of the body is without doubt, as it is our very means of experiencing, and consequently the foundation of our knowledge. If we consider then, that the process of research is about developing knowledge of an environment, of people, there is an urgent need to reassess the role of the body within methodology. This is particularly true when we consider the positionality of adult researchers with child participants. An adult's body will always preclude them from fitting within children's fields of interaction. From a phenomenological perspective we must ask, how does this affect knowledge production? This has specific resonance for child-centred work, which places importance on a researcher's ability to produce knowledge that puts children's priorities, viewpoints and concerns at its core.

### *Child-Centred Research.*

As has been well documented, the emergence of child-centred research has its roots in reactions against theories of socialisation and developmental psychology (Verhellen, 1997 Qvortrop, 1994). Unlike these disciplines, which are orientated towards the future, a child-centred approach focuses on the present (Uprichard 2008). With this a greater interest in children's agency, perspectives and peer interactions have emerged (James 2013). However, for researchers to access such experiences, children must trust and relate to an adult in a way

they may not have done before. While child-centred work acknowledges the competencies and abilities of children, it is also important to consider how adults may be viewed by them. Adults often set boundaries, discipline and teach children, and this is particularly true in the school setting. Moreover, children may act in ways to please the adult researcher or in fear of their reaction to them (Punch 2002; Flewitt 2005). The effect of the relational context between researcher and child participants then is particularly acute (Oakley 1981). In light of this, child-centred work has turned to a technique known as the ‘least-adult’ method.

Coined by Mandell (1988), this approach argues that a researcher can minimise their adult identity and become an involved participant observer of children’s worlds. Within the literature this has been taken to mean that one refrains from disciplining children, giving them advice or instruction, let them call you by your first name and spend as much time as possible with the children, as opposed to with teachers and staff (Einarsdottir 2007). The objective of this approach is to shift the relational context between children and adults, with the hope that this allows the researcher access to situated performances often hidden from adults (Atkinson 2019, Epstein 1998). However, there have been two major critiques of this approach. Firstly, that there are many practical impediments to being ‘least-adult’, and secondly, that power relations amongst adults and children are not linear. On the second point, Gallagher (2008) argues there has been a blind spot in child-centred research, in that its’ aim has been to uncover the agency and creativity of children, yet the power tactics they can employ to control other children and the researcher have been ignored. Using the work of De Certeau, he reminds early years researchers that power can be diffuse and contextual; and in the absence of adults asserting their power, children can dominate and silence each other. Atkinson (2019) draws on Gallagher’s work to show the multiple practical impediments and ethical dilemmas of being ‘least-adult’, and joins authors like Horton (2008), Barker and Weller (2001) and Christensen (2004) who have tried to produce less sanitized accounts of the challenges of fieldwork. The reservations levelled at child-centred and least-adult research are persuasive, and I will offer my own examples of the tensions incurred while practicing the method in relation to issues of the body. This paper though, will highlight the benefit of the *attempt* at being least-adult, specifically the embodied nature of the method, and its impact on the researchers’ somatic knowledge.

Indeed, Mandell’s (1988) original conception of the technique spends considerable time discussing physicality; she argues that the last obstacle to adults joining the child world as a participant is their physical body. Within child-centred research there is a dearth of analysis on this point. However, in other fields there has been some consideration of this. For instance, in ethnic and racial studies, the profile of the person who undertakes qualitative research is the subject of debate, specifically the capacity of white researchers to conduct research into the experience of racism (Smith 1990; Thompson 2003). In gender studies, the ability of males to study women and women to study masculinities has also been debated (Lefkowich 2019, Thomas 2017). Much of this work has focused on differences between insider and outsider perspectives, and how power dynamics in research, and within the wider system of distribution, impact the research relationship (Merriam et al 2010). Yet, given the existential underpinnings of these fields, there is a reluctance to name the physicality at the core of this. Namely, that respondents may assess the researcher based on their bodies. This is even more surprising given the extensive literature in psychology that shows individuals, especially children, use bodily phenotypes to create in-groups and out-groups (Aboud 2003). There is a paucity then in methodological scholarship, which acknowledges how a researcher can be judged through their bodies. This is particularly problematic within childhood studies. Indeed, James (2000) has contended that any account of children or childhood must be rooted

in an embodied perspective, as the process of growing up places the body at the heart of children's identities.

When we discuss the body though, we must be more precise in what we are referring to; in this regard it is useful to consider the body as both an object and a tool. As an object we may refer to our bodies as 'passive', i.e. characteristics such as skin colour and height are difficult to change. As a tool our bodies are active, through our movements and demeanour, which are arguably more accessible to manipulation<sup>i</sup> (Garratt 2019). When the body is discussed in the methodology literature, it tends to be in relation to the active body, as scholars highlight the performative techniques they employed in fieldwork. Below, I will add to this work, but also consider the effect of the passive body and the implications this has for our embodied knowledge through our corporeal schemas of perception.

### *Method and Consent*

The data drawn on here comes from a large child-centred study of diversity in seven primary schools in Dublin, Ireland in the 2008/2009 academic year. Access to schools was negotiated with principals, parents and children by fully disclosing the aims of the research and providing all parties with information booklets and consent forms (Curry et al 2011). Data collection tools of semi-structured interview and observation were employed. While child centred-research has been preoccupied with the development of child specific data collection methods, as a team we concurred with other childhood researchers that with some adjustments children are able to engage in established methods, such as interviewing and participant observation (Harden et al 2000). Interviews took place individually or in small self-selecting twos and threes with three hundred and forty three children. Discussions were loosely guided by a topic list, but tailored to each interview with notes from observations, and reminders of informal conversations to be revisited in the interview (if the opportunity arose). A typical question was open ended such as 'tell me about your friends?', from which children would talk relatively unaided on their opinions, interests and tastes. Data from four schools<sup>ii</sup>, (one mixed gender school, two all-boys schools and one all-girls school) are drawn on here, totalling ninety-three participants, aged seven to twelve years. School 3 was revisited in the 2009/2010 academic year for the author's work alone. Approximately two hundred hours of observation notes are drawn on here. Observations were unstructured, the only focus was for the researcher to play with the children in activities that interested them.

The first step in any qualitative fieldwork is for the researcher to introduce themselves to participants. In keeping with a least-adult positionality I presented myself as a 'researcher' and defined this as someone who was concerned with what 'children like and don't like', and especially interested in 'how children from all different countries and backgrounds got on together'. For the first couple of days I spent time with the children in informal classes, breakfast, break and lunch times where I re-introduced myself along these lines. I explained the research in appropriate terms, and read the age specific information leaflet with the children. I made sure the children understood I would be observing them during class and break times, and would interview them individually or in small groups according to their preference (Garratt 2018). At all times during the research introduction, one to one explanations, and throughout the fieldwork I emphasised that they were not obligated to take part and they could stop at any time. Thus, gaining consent was not a discrete process, but one that was constantly negotiated (Cocks 2006). Moreover, following the *Children First: The National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (Tusla 1999), I did not guarantee the children full confidentiality. Instead, at the beginning of the fieldwork process

and at the start of each interview I reiterated that anything they told me, I would not tell their parents, teachers or other children in the class. However if they disclosed something that worried me I would have to tell someone, but I would talk to them first before I would tell anyone else.

Discussions of the body lie at the heart of this paper and issues of race are touched on below. Consequently, data is presented with a descriptive code that includes, school, gender, age and racial background. This is to demonstrate that the issues inculcated in the least-adult role are, with some exceptions, not confined to one particular group. Those born in Ireland to two parents born in Ireland are described as majority group Irish [MGI] and are racialised as white. All of the children referred to as minority group Irish, have two parents born outside of Ireland, some moved in early childhood, others were born in Ireland and are 2nd generation. Where a child's family are from West Africa they are described as West African Irish [WAI], East Asian Irish [EAI] and South Asian Irish [SAI]. Quotes are labelled with school number, background descriptor, gender and age; i.e. school three, West African Irish, boy, aged eight will be labelled [3,WAI,B8] in the second year of observation the label is [3(II),WAI,B8].

### *The Passive Body in the Least-Adult Positionality*

With the need for a formal introduction, full disclosure of the aims of the research and child protection protocols, I was initially positioned very far from the least-adult ideal. In Mandell's (1988) original approach using the active body in an 'un-adult' like way can 'de-power' one's adult status. Following her lead I encouraged the children to use my first name, I dressed informally (discussed below), distanced myself from teachers and spent all my time with the children, sitting where they sat during assemblies and participated in the playground. Over time, I had some success cultivating the 'least-adult' status I sought, as the children seemed to view me differently to other adults in their lives:

**You can run fast and play football like my big sister** [3,MGI,B8]

**You don't look old not like our teacher** [1,MGI,B8]

**Are you a real grown up or only a little bit of one?** [4,SAI,G7]

**You look like half teacher, half child** [3(II),WAI,B8]

*A little boy from the other 2nd class group comes up to me during yard to ask me if he can go to the bathroom. I tell him he better ask a teacher as I am not one, Barry then runs over and says to him 'she's not a teacher she is [name] a friend of our class' he then runs back to the football field* [3,MGI,B8]

However, I cannot with any honesty state I was able to make my passive body negligible, indeed, what I looked like was a curiosity to children. I was asked how tall I was? Could they touch my hair? They guessed my age by drawing on physical clues 'You are not that wrinkly so I'd say 16' [4,WAI,G11]. Comments were made on my perceived attractiveness, some of which was hard to take, such as observations that I had 'one eyebrow lower than the other' [1,MGI,B11] and 'thin lips' [4,WAI,G12]. One girl pointed out I had hair growing out of a mole under my lip, leading her to call me 'hairy chin' [1,MGI,G9]. I was taken aback by this scrutiny of my appearance and I was embarrassed. Compliments were also a way girls attempted to bond and possibly manipulate me. I was told I had great eyes, skin, teeth, this was also fraught with difficulty, given good manners within their peer group was to reciprocate compliments. A grown woman complimenting 7-12 year old girls appearance

though is at the very least ethically dubious. Therefore, I resorted to saying ‘thank you’ when they complimented me and trying to find something more skills based to respond with, such as praising their sporting or academic skills. Nevertheless, this strategy wasn’t always successful, consider this exchange:

**Nicola:** [Name] I love your face, you have really hollow like cheeks, like really hollow like, what’s that called?

**Jill:** Cheekbones?

**Nicola:** Yeah that’s it, I like your cheekbones, my face is too fat  
*Your face isn’t fat at all.*

**Nicola:** It is

*No it’s not, anyway what you look like doesn’t matter it’s all about your personality and if you are a good friend.*

**Nicola:** I’m fat

*No.*

**Jill:** No you’re not Nicola not like me I’m fat, you are actually so skinny

*No-ones fat and you know what you are both great friends and good in school.*

**Nicola:** You sound like me Ma (slang for mother). [4,MGI,G11]

My awkwardness with engaging in this bonding ritual and my anxiety to reassure the girls, exposed me to accusations of being parent like, the very opposite of my least-adult goal. Another common ritual was the process of finding faults with one’s body, which I was also invited to engage in:

*Girl 1, 2 and 3 were talking by the wall in the yard and I joined them without much effort, as they wanted to try on my scarf. The scarf was passed around the girls and they commented on the colour of it and if it suited them and each other or not. [Girl 1] then started to say her neck was too short for a scarf, which the other two assured it was not, [Girl 2] responded by saying her neck was too skinny and look at the vain ‘popping’ out of her throat, which was also denied by her friends, [Girl 3] then said her neck was too fat to the reassurance and placation of her friends. I felt pressure to say something negative about myself to join in on this bonding exercise, but I really hate the way these 11/12 year old girls are so versed in tearing down their bodies, can I be complicit in this? Should I not be modelling more positive behaviour, in the face of potentially sanctioning this sort of self-hatred? I couldn’t do it, I reverted back to saying something like ‘you are all lovely girls and my scarf looks great on you’ and trying to change the subject, but this once again separated me from being just one of ‘the girls’ and emphasised my adulthood.* [2,MGI,G11/12]

When interacting with the girls I became concerned with how many of their rituals were centred on appearance and on pastimes such as dancing, which centred on their passive and active bodies. My years of academic training and committed feminism had lead me to be uncomfortable with identities aligned with the body. Moreover, my hesitancy to engage in this type of bonding was sometimes read as judgement of their activities, ‘ooh [name] doesn’t like it when we talk about how fat we are’ [2,SAI,G11], and as a rebuff of their invitation to be ‘one of them’, a positionality I was trying to cultivate. In trying to guide them onto the attributes I felt were more important, was I trying to regulate their behaviour? If so, how could this be ‘least-adult’? (Atkinson 2019).

The fact that society puts a lot of pressure on young girls to focus on their presentation and body shape is not news; yet how this may impact the relational context of research is something the literature offers very little guidance on. Moreover, this was not confined to girls; one of the earliest lessons on the effect of my appearance came from a group of young boys in an all-boys school. From this class I learned my style of dress had implications for my relationships with the children. I adopted a consistent wardrobe of wearing casual jeans,



runners and jumpers or t-shirts, hair tied up, contact lenses and no make-up. This casual style distinguished me from the more professional looking teachers, it also minimised as much as possible the ‘feminine’ about me. Its consistency became something of a ‘uniform’ that I chose to adopt, after this incident:

*On the way to the church today some of the boys from the class kept turning around to look at me, I smiled back at them but after the third time of this happening I went up to walk along side [names] to see what was going on, after a few seconds of awkward silence [name] said to me ‘didn’t know it was you [Lindsey], you look like our teacher!’ and they both started to laugh. I laughed with them and told them a joke I heard from [name] about a duck, they laughed, when I felt they had relaxed I asked them why I looked like their teacher, ‘your hair is long like [class teacher], you shouldn’t wear a dress you can’t play football in that’.* [3MGI,WAI,B7]

Even though I looked nothing like their teacher who was tall and blond and I short and brunette, I realised my change of appearance, which was prompted by preparing for a meeting later in the day had unsettled the boys. The overt feminisation of my body associated me with their teacher, and by implication with authority, as the only other female in a class of boys. Despite my explicit articulations to the children that what you look like does not matter, it did matter. It was a key way in which they bonded with each other and got a sense of who belonged and who did not. This had real implications for inter-ethnic relations, as I have discussed elsewhere (Garratt 2019, 2018, 2017), but also for their interactions with me.

As a white woman from the majority community, my physical body had, and has, many complex implications for fieldwork and my scholarship on racism. For a full discussion please see (Garratt 2018). With regards to its effect on my positionality of the least-adult role, it is without doubt my white body allowed me access to the racist opinions of the white majority children. It is hard to imagine they would have disclosed as much of their racializing behaviour to a researcher of colour (Garratt 2019, 2018, 2017, 2011). This had ethically challenging implications. If my whiteness facilitated disclosures of racism from the white children, it is entirely possible; indeed probable, I was part of the domination of migrant children. I got some insight into this early in the fieldwork process. In the first classroom I worked in, I interviewed a young girl ‘Natalie’ of West African background and later the same day her white majority classmate ‘Suzi’. The next day I was playing with Natalie at break time and I felt she was a little hesitant with me. I asked her what was wrong and she told me that Suzi was telling everyone that I told her what Natalie had said to me in her interview. Even though I had repeated to all the children, multiple times, that I would not tell their peers anything they said to me, Suzi had obviously felt her lie might be believed. After reassuring Natalie, I made an announcement in front of the class reiterating the privacy of the interview (with child protection caveats). If I had followed a strictly least-adult policy I could not have put myself at the top of the class in a position of authority, but as Gallagher (2008) points out it would have been unethical not to use my adult power to protect a vulnerable child.

In this case though, I could see how Suzi drew on our mutual whiteness to create what she felt was a plausible lie; but it is without doubt, there were hidden processes I was not aware of. Indeed, as researchers we must face up to hard realities that children may experience domination as a result of our research. Any researcher pursuing a least-adult positionality then must be reflexive on the effect of their racialized body. The consequences of one’s race cannot be disregarded under the illusion that skin colour can be transcended (Smith 1990; Thompson 2003). Yet, while the least-adult role will never allow one to overcome racial power dynamics, by committing to spending time with the children I was sensitized to

Natalie's changed demeanour. Arguably, a more detached method of observation would not have allowed me to develop such a nuanced 'feel' for the situation. Thus, when our physical bodies are barriers in research, it is even more important for ethnographers to be brave in using their active bodies to at least partially bridge this divide, and attune their somatic knowledge through fully committing to engage in the field.

### *The Active Body in the Least-Adult Positionality*

Within a child-centred approach, the active body is often used as a way to minimise one's status by behaving in ways not associated with adults. In pursuit of a least-adult positionality, I engaged in many such activities. For instance, in school 4 the children enjoyed making up dance routines, which over time I became involved in. One afternoon, the girls wanted to show the class teacher a routine I had been participating in during break time and insisted I be part of the show. This was embarrassing and I can still feel a wave of humiliation as I think of it now. Yet, this was topped when another group organised an in-class singing competition and wanted me to participate. As I didn't know what to sing, the girls suggested I sing a song from the children's film *High School Musical*. Not knowing the song, I opted for *Dancing Queen* by Abba and was given a mark of 10 out of 10 by the children.

Throughout the two-year fieldwork process, I took part in games of chasing, football, card games and basketball and I attempted more instances of dancing and singing. I did cartwheels and built sandcastles at the children's request. I let the children do my hair, give me 'tattoos' in marker and wear my sunglasses, scarves and gloves. I twisted my body into uncomfortable positions to mimic their body language, sitting on curbs, gravelled playground surfaces, squatted and slouched to be at their eye level, swung from gates and doors, jumped from picnic tables and tried to climb a pillar to retrieve a basketball. I also participated in tests of strength, which involved bearing witness to demonstrations of muscularity and taking part myself, for instance:

*Sam and Brendan are talking to me, they begin to lift each other up and say to me 'look how strong I am'. [...] Sam now pulls up his sleeve and flexes his muscles which is then copied by Brendan who also points out a scar on his elbow [...] He then tells me he got this by doing a wheelie on his bike. Samson interrupts and shows me how high he can jump. [...] Cahal challenges me to arm wrestling and each in turn arm wrestle me. None of these boys can move my hand, they jump and try to use their body weight but I decide not to budge. I am told I am very strong. Samson now challenges me to an arm wrestle. He is very persistent, the rest of the boys walk away and start talking about other things [We are walking back to school from a nature walk]. We are coming up to a road and it is Samson's fifth time trying to beat me. For the sake of peace and safety I let him win, where upon he runs off shouting, 'I beat her I beat her!'. [...] Samson comes back to me and says 'I am so strong, you are an adult and I beat you'.*

[Sam, Brendan, Cahal, Dillon MGI; Samson WAI, all 8]

I felt in a tricky position during tests of strength. Should an adult arm-wrestle eight year old boys? I was concerned with hurting them, and I wasn't sure if they would respect me more or less if I beat them. I decided the best strategy was not move my hand, neither winning nor losing to refrain from putting pressure on their hands. What this meant for my acceptance as least-adult is not clear, the young boys in question didn't ask the teacher to engage in performances of strength, however as Samson says it was probably because of my status as an adult they wanted to compete with me. Far from being childlike then, I still represented adulthood. This inability to transcend my adult identity came both from a child protection

standpoint, but also from the simple fact that I was not physically a child. My active embodiment of pursuits, games and bodily postures of children, could never be separated from my passive body. However, in the instances where I managed, to not exactly be childlike, but perhaps be less adult like, my physical body facilitated this. For instance, I needed to trade on my good fitness levels to be an active participant in games and sports. Coupled with my casual dress and willingness to engage in activities often humiliating for adults to participate in, this did position me in a somewhat different space to teachers, perhaps as a ‘big sister’ [4,MGI,G11] or ‘friend of the class’ [3,WAI,B8]. Given the misgivings I and others have expressed about the least-adult role, what is the worth of this technique? I would like to suggest its value lies in the attempt. As the effort to be least-adult, has important implications for the embodied knowledge of the researcher.

### *Corporeal Schema of Perception*

Gallagher (2008) raises doubt that depowering strategies necessarily produce better sorts of knowledge. Indeed my choice to engage in traditional methods of data collection somewhat concurs with these reservations. In my attempt to be least-adult though, there were several incidents where processes of racial discrimination were disclosed to me but hidden from other adults in the school (Garratt 2017, 2018, 2019). My position as a somewhat ‘odd’ adult seemed to help me to gain insight into these normally obscured behaviours, ‘*I’m only telling you (about experience of racism) ‘name’ as you won’t be harsh with me*’ [3,WAI,B8].

Nevertheless, it remains problematic to contend that time spent in the field with children remains anything more than the observation of an outsider. It is wrong to believe that participant observation can be conducted with children, as ‘participant’ is the key word here. As an adult female in the social world of children, it is impossible to be a true insider. While my ‘least-adult’ role worked well in differentiating me from teachers and parents, the researcher can never fully negate their status as an adult, nor would they want to. As adults we share responsibility to protect children, and I was required to break confidentiality with children on three occasions, as I felt the racism uncovered had crossed into the realm of child welfare<sup>iii</sup> (Garratt 2018). However, observation in this study was not that of a detached method, but was rather an unstructured qualitative observation from the adult context of the field, onto which children’s worlds unfold (Hill 1997). In my position as researcher, while my gaze came from the same space as other adults, I would contend its direction and purpose became different through the fieldwork process.

The benefit of stepping outside a duality of mind and body is perhaps best illustrated by the value this has for re-conceptualising perception. Within Cartesian thought, intelligence, emotions, consciousness and perception are located within a separate realm of the mind. In contrast Ryle (1949) argues this process is far from discrete but linked to our perception of the outside world, understood through our bodies. For instance, the bodily processes experienced in emotions are similar for many positive and negative states, but it is the nature of the triggering event which gives them meaning. Emotions then are not introspective in a Cartesian sense but are connected to the social. Ryle (1949) extends this argument to contend that if emotions are partially constructed by outside forces, so are the very structures of thought, consciousness and perception, as these states can only be experienced indirectly. For instance, we can perceive objects and subjects, but we cannot perceive perception or be conscious of consciousness, without using some construct such as language, images or emotions to represent them. Thus, consciousness and perception are a ‘sensuous relationship to the external world’ (Crossley, 2001:47) where an inward examination always takes an outward turn.

When deconstructing the concept of an ‘immaterial mind’ though, critics often argue that agents are reduced to biology, where agency and creativity cannot be accounted for (Scott, 1991). This argument has some validity when we consider the ‘vulgar materialism’, which lies on the opposite end of this spectrum (Crossley, 2001). Implicit within these criticisms is the dualist assumption of an either/or, that any shift away from one perspective leads to its extreme opposite. There seems to be a lack of imagination that another way could exist, not simply a compromise between these two perspectives, but the development of a new way of looking at the mind and body. The phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1965) argues the human organism is both material and more than the sum of its parts. He contends that our relationship with any environment cannot be understood as an objective factor impinging upon a person, as any effect of an environment derives its meaning through the way a person perceives it, he contends:

*It is as false to place ourselves in society as an object amongst objects, as it is to place society in ourselves as an object of thought, and in both cases the mistake lies in treating the social as an object. We must return to the social with which we are in contact by the mere fact of existing, and which we carry about inseparably with us before any objectification’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 362).*

Here, he endeavoured to decentre the subject/object divide to argue that the way objects are perceived, and our development as perceptual subjects, are rooted in our being in the world (Crossley, 2001). Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty (1965) intelligence is an embodied ‘know how’, an ability to move within an environment and simply fit without conscious effort. Yet, this does not mean there is anything pre-social about this, it is a learned ability, but incorporated within the logic of the body to the extent that it seems natural.

Thus, within the phenomenological tradition, perception is understood as an acquired habit of the body, built upon our sensuous relationship to an environment made through our embodied interactions with it. Within the social sciences, Wacquant (2011, 2015) has been the most vocal on the relevance of this for method. He argues for a ‘carnal’ understanding of research, which requires the researcher to physically throw themselves into fieldwork as ‘he comes to know his object *by body*’ [original emphasis] (2015, 4). Indeed, since a fundamental part of the research process is about the development of the researcher’s perception of the field, how one’s corporeal schemas are allowed to adapt to an environment are crucial. In my attempt to imitate the actions of the children, I experienced new bodily sensations and over time developed some basic skills as habitualised routines. The activities I took part in developed incrementally; launching into a rendition of *Dancing Queen* was not a ‘natural’ fit for me, but emerged as a possibility throughout my time in the field. To acclimatise to children’s worlds then, necessitates a change in vision for the researcher. By committing to the least-adult role, my corporeal schema of perception began to expand and my capacity to understand phenomena reorganised (Wacquant 2011).

While I can never contend to have been a participant in children’s worlds, my gaze arguably became different from other adults. The habituated schemas of teachers and parents are vested with interests, such as maintaining order, watching for danger and professional practice (Curry et al 2011), which is less pressing (but not entirely absent) for the least-adult researcher. Although being least-adult in an ideal sense is not achievable, in the attempt to physically and actively engage in children’s worlds, the researchers’ embodied perception may be augmented in ways that are different from more detached and dignified methods. To consider the body within method then, we cannot simply focus on how the researcher uses their passive and active bodies to depower themselves but must also acknowledge how

attempting to embody the role shifts the somatic perceptions of the researcher. In short, being physically in the field develops our perceptual schemas, and this is a key part of interpreting fields and our intellectual activity.

### *Conclusion*

Atkinson calls for a reconceptualisation of the least-adult technique as an ‘honorary child’, which is something an adult researcher cannot demand children accept, but is ‘granted’ or denied’ by them (2019: 199). I agree with the wisdom of acknowledging the contingent nature of this role and children’s right to rescind it. Yet, I prefer the terminology of ‘least-adult’, as the wording does not claim to be that of a child, but rather of the cultivation of the least like an adult one can be. One’s adult identity can never be transcended, primarily because adults have a duty to protect children, but also because they are not physically children. While it is possible to distinguish oneself from other adults, this too is contingent on one’s body. The active body is crucial for developing and maintaining the least-adult positionality but it can never be fully separated from the passive body. Indeed, I am now dubious of my ability to engage with this method at my now increased age. If we centralise the body within methodology, we should perhaps reflect on, and acknowledge that, not every researcher will be equally able to engage in certain methods. Indeed, one’s age, life stage, stature and fitness will have a bearing on one’s ability to engage in the least-adult technique.

The body matters too for developing one’s schemas of perception within fieldwork. When intellect and embodiment cannot be neatly separated it is necessary to recognise the bearing our physical bodies have for the relational context of research. In Wacquant’s words, research is a flesh and blood reality, where ‘the body is not just a socially construct-ed product but also a socially construct-ing vector of knowledge, practice, and power’ (2015; 7). Intellectual activity is not clean and detached, but embedded, meaningful and resides at a habitual level. Perhaps then, we should not only consider the success or failure of our acceptance (in the way we would prefer) by participants, and consider that the process of trying to be accepted has value. It is the contention of this piece that the least-adult techniques’ worth resides in its insistence on researcher’s engagement, commitment and fully sensuous emersion in children’s worlds. This has enormous value for the embodied knowledge of the researcher and for educational researchers especially as, to borrow Heidegger’s (1951-1952) terminology, we are reminded how it is we learn, by trying to live it, makes it more alive.

Indeed, in making our learning more alive, it has become more acceptable to highlight the tensions and failures of our methodological approaches. As the cornerstone of phenomenological research is active, ongoing reflexivity, which ‘saturates every stage of the research’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004: 274), personal disclosure has become best practice in our scholarship. Yet, we continue to sanitize our bodies out of our accounts. The need to reflect and be explicit about the impact of our passive and active bodies is crucial. Not only because our race, behaviour, appearance and fitness levels have real consequences, but also because the very structures of our thought and knowledge are embodied capacities. The body is not peripheral in methodology, it is the key to our engagement.

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<sup>i</sup> The passive and active body are not as easily separated as defined here. For instance skin lightening/tanning, cosmetic and sex reassignment surgery show how we can come to construct the 'passive' body.

<sup>ii</sup> The author did not collect data in the three other schools

<sup>iii</sup> Breaking confidentiality was dealt with a high degree of discretion to protect all parties. Disclosures took place at the end of the fieldwork process and therefore had little impact on my positionality.