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The Work of Gender for Children: Now You See It, Now You Don't

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As part of her 'day in a life' study of eight-year-old Nkosi, researcher Sue walks for half an hour with him, his sister and his mother Lorraine through the rain and London housing estates to reach his Catholic primary school. On the way, Sue and Lorraine chat about Nkosi's recent, costly, birthday party, and how his father is returning to the Caribbean soon. They pass the local, more convenient, primary school that his cousins attend, and a police stop-and-search, which Lorraine comments has been happening regularly for months. Before entering the school, Nkosi changes his rain boots for shiny black shoes.

In this chapter, we explore the work of gender that we find in the everyday lives of children, but also the work of gender that characterizes the analytic labours of the feminist researcher – reflecting on both these aspects and the

FIGURE 6.1 *Nkosi's shiny black shoes*

connections between them that we encounter through a reflexive and materialist orientation to methodology.¹ Our approach involves theoretically focused understandings of gender, which in turn inform our orientation towards empirical material and empirically grounded research practices, asking how these categories are created and experienced in everyday life. These are not distinct approaches, instead marking the directions of traffic that are always involved in the back-and-forth processes of knowledge construction that characterize social research. Yet, a lack of awareness about the categories that we impose on the world through our research may not only impoverish our analysis, but also diminish the lives we seek to know. The lens that we adopt has consequences for what and how we see it. Our subtitle 'now you see it now you don't' refers to a series of questions including the part played by the researcher's gaze in producing accounts of gender, how gender differences are more or less explicit and marked in different spaces, and how we might make sense of why, when and how gender does (and perhaps does not) matter in children and young people's everyday lives.

¹An early version of this paper was presented in March 2015 at the Arctic University of Norway at an international research symposium called 'The work of gender in the lives of children and young people'.

Nkosi's walk to school might be taken as telling a powerful story about growing up as a young black boy in London, in post-colonial contexts marked by fluid migrations; about the futures that beckon or threaten, the ambitions and fears that his family has for him. In wondering whether his school can appreciate the significance of those shiny black shoes (see Figure 6.1), carefully preserved from the rain, we ask ourselves too what a feminist gender lens enables us to see, but also what might be missed, and how we can honour the complexities of the lives we glimpse.

Operationalizing and assembling sex/gender

The approach we take in this chapter follows Nayak and Kehily's 2008 project, which pinpoints three analytic foci for empirical research into gender. First, it adopts a *situated frame*: asking what does it mean to be a 'proper' girl/boy in this precise time and place? What are the costs of failing to inhabit this identity? What are the possibilities for doing things differently? The 'situation' may be very precise, going beyond the usual dimensions of class, race and sexuality to include more precise contingencies such as what it means in *this* family, as perhaps a first child in a new generation, in a certain neighbourhood of a particular town. Working with longitudinal case studies, we are attuned to the importance of these questions of timing and positionality, while also understanding them as part of and contributing to wider patterns and formations. Secondly, we adopt an *observational approach*, to document how gender is experienced, enacted and embodied in everyday life. Thirdly, we work with a *performative theory* that draws attention to how gender is produced (what is the work children do); how it is regulated (noticing the role of schooling/state) and how it is consumed (in/by popular culture, the 'market').

Our analysis makes no distinction between on and off line environments, and we explore how bodies and the non-human material world are implicated, assembled and entangled in sex/gender and family projects (Fox & Alldred 2013; Barad 2007; Blaise 2005; Castañeda 2002). We think about sex/gender as operating simultaneously at different scales – extensive and intensive. We zoom in for the close-up of a moment of interaction and zoom out to think about gender regimes and normativities that are part of the apparatus of governance. These scales are also temporal and involve the long slow timescapes of intergenerational family transmissions as well as the intensive temporalities associated with mastering a new toy or classroom technique (cf. Castañeda 2002).

In analysing our data through a post-empirical but materialist lens, we set out to recognize the intra-action between bodies, identities and material /

cultural resources, showing both what young people do *with* these resources and what these materials might do *to* them. Arguably, debates about the commercialization and sexualization of childhood have made this more difficult to do outside a moralistic framework or a determinist bias. These debates have captured popular and political attention across the developed western world in recent years, with a range of anxieties and constituencies circulating around the supposedly dangerous shaping of modes of sex/gender by consumer products and by digital lives and play.² This agenda has reinforced polarized assumptions about girls as victims (objectified and undermined by popular culture) and boys as boosted by the same material (learning problematically sexist but dominant attitudes and behaviours). A focus on the material and commercial practices of parenting and children's own consumption, exemplified for instance in boycotts of pink and blue ('Pink Stinks' or 'Let Girls be Girls'), has (in the UK at least) resulted in a situation where children's gender performances and practices have become markers for social class, ethnicity and social exclusion, effectively stigmatizing or marginalizing working class or non-western cultural values (Bragg 2014; Kehily 2012; Egan 2013; Renold et al. 2015). We aim to resist these shifts and preserve the gains made through the key analytic idea of sex/gender as performative effect – gaining the *appearance* of being natural through repetition over time. This changed the political project from earlier liberal modes of anti-sexism, towards strategies of disruption and the celebration of diversity and non-conformity where the very categories male and female and the assumptions that lead from them are open to contestation.³

Although gender is one (important) analytic lens and a difference that matters, we acknowledge that it is how it works in combination with other differences (such as social class, sexuality and ethnicity, in particular times and places) that gives it meaning and power. Gender can have an authorizing or 'fixing' role so that terms such as 'good boy/girl' can eclipse the significance of other differences. We attempt to maintain a 'queer eye' on our research data, meaning that we are sensitized not only to the intersections of gender with sexuality, but also to the performativities of our own analysis – how far we focus on and thus bring into view the non-normative alongside the normative. Finally, we contend that gender is simultaneously part of our inner and

²In the United Kingdom, various policy reviews were commissioned by both New Labour (1997–2010) and Coalition (2010–2015) UK governments. Some of these had little academic credibility, such as a 2010 review of 'the sexualisation of young people' led by psychologist Linda Papadopoulos for the Home Office and, in 2011, a further review of the commercialization and sexualization of childhood for the Department of Education led by Reg Bailey, CEO of a Christian charity. A key policy and academic document was a 2009 review of children and the commercial world (Buckingham 2009a).

³Although present within radical feminist theory from the 1970s, these ideas gained popularity through the writings of Judith Butler from the early 1990s.

outer worlds. Analysing gender should be able to connect the social and the psychic without collapsing into the 'mythic' and losing a connection to the significance of time, place and power. This requires a way of thinking about dependency and development as well as the psychodynamic processes of everyday relationships that involve 'family dialogues' (Rosenthal 2002), 'repudiations' (Nayak & Kehily 2013), 'investments' and 'unconscious defences' (Frosh et al. 2002) and what Reay (2002) calls the 'psychic costs of class, gender and ethnic identifications'.

The collaborative work of gender at home: Younger participants' objects, histories and selves

The invitation to 7 and 8-year-olds to share their 'favourite things' generally took us into domestic spaces: bedrooms and living rooms and the diverse material environments of children's homes that reveal gender as a situational negotiation between parents, children and siblings.

Gabriel's home environment is powerfully structured by parental decisions about play: the absence of the digital and of explicitly gendered toys (coded by colour), a focus on games and practices that are pedagogical in character and open to adult participation and view (board games, make and do), and toys that memorialize people, places and moments in their lives (Minty the cuddly sheep from a family holiday). As his favourite thing, Gabriel chooses a bicycle which he describes in ways that emphasize his physicality and skills and perhaps his superiority to his younger brother. Growing up as two boys in a middle-class household with two mothers provides a particular quality to the project of gender making for Gabriel and his brother. He presents himself as a clever and active boy who is skilled in music, maths and games, but in a school context, he may struggle a little to display the kinds of qualities that make him a popular boy with other children.

Nkosi also draws our attention to a wheeled vehicle in his choice of favourite things, in his case, a plastic toy motorbike (see Figure 6.2). How he shares it with us reveals an understanding of loss and attachment and the sense that this is a sphere of urgent labour: he has imagined himself as an adult man, a father, giving this toy to his own children. If he has a daughter, he will spray it pink or purple. If his son doesn't like orange he will spray it red. Nkosi's position as the only boy-child in a family where his father is an inconstant yet enduring presence shaped by transnational migration practices suggests that he is taking up his affective work within the family. This includes bridging time, place and attachment through the careful curation of precious objects.

FIGURE 6.2 *Imagined masculinities: Nkosi's motorbike*

Because we have backstory about Nkosi's family from our earlier study, we notice echoes with his grandmother's choice of a box of personal belongings from her deceased father that she shared with researchers in her 'favourite things' interview seven years earlier (see Figure 6.3) – captured here in the researcher Sue's fieldnote:

For her past object, Beverley had chosen a set of things that remind her of her father, who 'was quite a focal point in our family' and 'has a special place in my heart'. He was 70 years old when he died. These were things she 'will never do away with, ever', and she had them all together in a shoebox. She had always been much closer to her father than her mother. The first thing she showed me was the wire chain that her father used to make up, recycling old coat hangers that she had obtained from her workplace, and explained how it was made and used to tie up animals without choking them. Then she produced her father's birth and death certificates, divorce papers, bank book, passport and NI card, that she had carefully kept. The items were all in the shoebox belonging to the trainers she had bought him, which he had only worn once. Finally, she produced his glasses, and his hat, and told me the story of her wearing his hat to go somewhere,

FIGURE 6.3 *Imagined masculinities: Beverley's mementos from her dad*

shortly after he'd been buried, and leaving the hat in a taxi. Greatly upset, she had thankfully managed to track it down.

David is an only child, providing a guided tour to his bedroom and toys that reveals him at the centre of a world of adult attention. When asked about how he has changed, he mentions the accumulation of dust on neglected toys and the difficulties he has with remembering. His favourite thing is his mum's old phone, through which he can Skype or WhatsApp the important people in his life, distinguishing knowledgeably between those who are online and offline. Games and toys are explained to the researcher according to what they *do*, how they fit into cross-media franchises, as well as with whom he plays them (and whether he wins) and in the case of his cuddly toy and guitar, how they facilitate his connection to places other than his home. He is attentive to the cost of things, noting that this is a concern within the household. Elsewhere, we have written about this case as illustrating 'relationship in context, that asks what we might understand if we just keep looking', noticing how material culture is caught up in ongoing processes of 'weaning', mediating attachment and separation for all parties (Thomson & Baraitser 2017). Six months later, we find David's room transformed, the

cherished collection of his childhood universe radically edited, usurped by the PlayStation and a friend, marking a new moment and a more peer-based gender project.

Also an only child, Saffron narrates her various collections to researcher Lucy, paying attention to temporality (when they were acquired, and how different collections and associated play superseded each other). Fragments of this description can be heard on the audio recordings on our website, and her low, quiet voice, contrasted to Lucien's or Gabriel's emphatic tones, tells something of gender in their respective families. She explains that before she began collecting Moshi Monsters, she collected Barbie dolls, which are rendered into the past tense by her. She also shares her almost-forgotten 'Leapfrog' computer, surpassed by the iPad through which she accesses music, videos and a range of games such as the 'Cake pop' cooking app. The iPad is also used to interact with her Furby, which can be fed and nurtured in interaction with an app. She explains that you can 'make it sick if you give it food it doesn't like', noting that her Dad once made the mistake of feeding it virtual fish. Saffron's collection of Moshi Monsters is a particular focus of attention, and she describes their different characteristics, and tells of how she can share them with her cousin and friends who also collect. Saffron likes to organize her Moshi Monsters into colours while her cousin organizes them according to whether they are 'good or bad'. Saffron prefers not to bring her Moshi Monsters to school in case she loses them, and we are left with a sense of a contained play world within her own home, connected strategically to friends and family, yet also private and interior. Researcher Lucy observes:

Collecting (and display) seems to be a bit of a theme – collecting dolls and soft toys past and present, collecting Moshi Monsters (MMs) and then collecting tracks on the iPad. All of these forms of collecting involve adults – buying, passing on, approving, displaying etc but as far as I could gather only the MMs involved interaction with other children (swapping). The type of play Saffron engages in with these MMs are about rescuing and adventures. Some of the MMs are duplicates so she has made them into siblings. Siblings argue together (said with a smile).

Saffron's media worlds appear to be surveilled in a way that we did not notice among the boy children: she asks her mother if she can look up particular (controversial) women performers such as Lady Gaga or Katy Perry online. Saffron's mother is aware that she needs to monitor and denies her request at that moment, but in practice, misses the fast-moving content that Saffron accesses by following all things Katy Perry. Debates about so-called 'sexualization', with

FIGURE 6.4 *Barbie dolls and their dramas*

their emphasis on the spectacular aspects of media consumption, and the threat to girls in particular, hover over such requests and their refusal.

The boundary between the everyday life of the household and fantasy/play seems more porous for Tempest, whose account of her favourite things takes the form of a vivid acting-out of the characters of her Barbie dolls. Tempest brings in a large crate full of Barbie dolls, too numerous to count and too heavy to carry, with the help of her mother, Kim (see Figure 6.4). Rifling through it looking for her favourite favourites, Tempest pulls out a few dolls and begins arranging them on the floor and dressing them up. Her 'very favourite' is a Barbie around which she builds a play scenario. The doll has a job looking after other people's babies, and sometimes has so many babies to look after that she has to organize helpers to assist her. The doll and looked-after-babies area grows as the play develops into a pyramid system of shared day-care. Tempest arranges and rearranges them, changing their clothes, brushing their hair and sometimes scolding them. 'I might as well talk to a brick wall!' she exclaims, quickly adding that Kim says that to her. Later, the looked-after-babies area breaks up and a group of other Barbie dolls prepare to go to a party. They are assigned their own car and a motorbike to take them there. Tempest gets them ready, asking for help in choosing shoes and accessories for the party

posse. Should she wear the light pink or dark pink high heels? Off they go to another space by the door, in front of the cat-flap. The dolls are in an excitable mood, tossing heads and hands in the air as they arrive at the party. Different toys are animated at different points. Tempest negotiates with them, whispering in their ear to ask if they are happy to have their photograph taken: 'Yes, but no flash-lights'. Tempest's imaginative play combines the familiar and domestic with the mediated. The looking-after-babies play script can be seen as an enactment of the child-minding arrangement in place for her until she began full-time school. Organizing and taking care of the dolls captures something of the texture of family life as Tempest mimics the morning routines and forms of admonishment experienced within her own home. In contrast, the excitement of party-going, glamour, dressing-up and flash photography appears to be drawn from the world of celebrity culture and effortlessly blended into her Barbie playtime activities. Tempest's play operates as a parallel space from which she can engage with and sometimes make raids on the interactions around her. Gender is clearly central to these interactions – coded within the toys as well as the focal point of a predominantly matriarchal household.

Gender projects beyond 'childhood': Fluid self-shaping

As the one daughter and only girl of triplets, and also as the youngest of our intensive one-year panel members, Megan (aged 10 at the start of the research) has a particularly charged relationship to gender difference. She has a very pink room, and proudly shows the rosettes that she has won in the most feminine practice of majoretting. She also shares her fluffy teddy, which has her initial embroidered to its chest in order to distinguish it from those that her brothers were given. Similarly, the three were all bought tablets for their recent birthdays, in response to their insistence that they no longer share. In our first interview, Megan's has a pink case, although she spends much of her time playing the (relatively) gender-neutral games of Minecraft and The Simpsons with her brothers. By the time of our day in a life meeting, her tablet is white, and by the final interview, it has become an iPad of the model approved by her new secondary school. Meanwhile, her room decoration moves from Moshi Monsters, to One Direction posters supplied by her uncle. Researcher Liam notes that this 'seems like a significant transition for her', and how she appears 'quite embarrassed' about it in the interview. They have gone by the end of the study. Meanwhile, her mother proudly recounts how at school Megan campaigned for – and achieved – a weekly girls' only day on the football pitch. Megan also describes spending time with her brothers, watching the Disney series Liv &

Maddie (about identical twins) and the Simpsons. In other words, our research charted an array of identity shifts in the time span of her involvement.

In comparison to the younger panel, some of our teenage participants had a nonchalant response to the favourite things task, appearing to improvise in the moment. Fifteen-year-old Jasmine looks around her room and chooses a lipstick to show researcher Ester; Funmi (aged 15) shows Liam the book she always 'carries around'. Yet, their expositions of these to-hand items are nonetheless fascinating. Jasmine explains how time can be marked through make-up, looking back at the eyeliner she felt naked without just a year ago. Funmi explains how she rereads her book, going 'deeper into it' to 'understand what actually was going on'. Her description emphasizes the storyline's themes of grief, loss and relationships (the character's mother drowns in a tragic accident, leaving her 'torn up' inside but unable to cry, and she encounters a 'mysterious boy who she feels like she knows . . . I guess she's kind of learning more about herself as a person . . .').

Others such as Aliyah (aged 14) take the task of memory-making seriously, sharing a box of objects including a dead Tamagotchi and an old school tie, which she has compiled to memorialize her childhood. Nathan (aged 13) has also retained a set of tiny trainers from his childhood, one of his oldest personal possessions. He un-self-consciously shares his collection of soft bears as his favourite thing from his past, reminiscing about the male friend from primary school who gave him one (see also Chapter 5). Several of the teenagers express nostalgia as they look back at favourite things that capture their lives at the age of seven or eight, as if this marked the end of a particular stage of enchanted or 'cute' childhood; an exception being Sean, who keeps few mementoes from before the onset of his degenerative illness. Teenage choices of favourite things of the moment tend to capture the here and now of their lives, whether intense internal worlds represented through music or books, or digital and connective media in the form of laptops, tablets and phones that connect them to peers and online culture, facilitating privacy from parents and the transcendence of home spaces. Teenagers reflecting back on their collections of toys and objects appear both to recognize and distance themselves from the gendered-ness of their histories. For example, bedrooms are often refurbished at this age (Abi at 15 and Nathan at 13 had already done this and Funmi, who apologises for the pinkness of her room, was planning to), with gender-coded colour schemes of pink and blue replaced by neutral grays, red and purple. Aliyah displays an amnesia about her Barbie dolls – indicating vaguely that she gave them to her younger sister who lost them – despite being reminded by her older sisters of their importance in her recent past. The adoption of androgynous and flexible favourites such as anime and Minecraft by tween-agers may suggest a new kind of self-conscious gender project, as we explore further below.

Materializing and situating gender: What the ‘favourite things’ method enables us to see

While much work on children’s material cultures emphasizes normativity (how toys are coded as girl and boy, inciting, inflating and eroticizing gender difference (Buckingham 2011)), the invitation to children to talk us through their favourite things reveals the specificity and situated nature of their particular gender projects. The ‘work’ that our methods capture is defined by the immediate situation, but also the underlying family dialogue. Change can happen suddenly, as revealed by switches between backwards facing nostalgia and forward facing developmental spurts. The urgency and uneven intensity of this work suggests that we need theoretical tools that allow for a balancing of individual/biographical logics in interaction with wider social, cultural processes and material conditions. Toys can operate as scaffolds as children explore and master their affordances. Whether this process maps onto the progressive and (hetero)normative narratives of developmental stages is another matter, begging the question of the various push and pull factors or logics of practice that might be in operation – including the production of class, race and sexual cultures and the negotiation of local family dynamics. By thinking about the ‘technicity’ (Stiegler 1998) of toys such as the Furby and Tamagotchi, we can enrich our understanding of the work of gender; such toys operate as goads – demanding attention yet necessarily doomed to die proving impossible to care for.

The method also reveals how far early childhood gender projects are collaborations with parents and other significant adults who choose the toys and shape the environments within which children operate. Evidence in this data of active practices of identification and dis-identification through processes of growing up suggests that there is constant conversation with adult gender formations as apprehended in everyday interactions and within popular culture. The gender assumptions that are written into toys (Furby or Barbie) may come in and out of focus and be used strategically and creatively by children, but this is very different from the imposition of meanings assumed within the ‘sexualization’ debate. Key questions relate to *how* they are played with, with whom and for what ends/pleasures.

The work of gender at school: Where formal and informal gender regimes collide

The invitation to spend a day with the researcher resulted in us following a school day with all but one of the 8-year olds and four of the older panel (two in a special

school, one primary, one secondary). Chapter 7 discusses schooling more generally; here, we focus specifically on gender. The distinctive contribution of our methods here is how, unlike much other research which looks at gender in one or other but not both locations, they enable us to explore the links and discontinuities between the respective gender projects of home and school.

When we look for evidence of gender in our field notes, we begin to understand how far the official curriculum deliberately elides gender while also embedding it. All the primary schools have simple uniforms which take the form of a standardized and badged coloured sweatshirt. The pre-eminent identifications offered by teachers are learning identities. For example, Lucien's Spanish teacher asks the class to articulate their 'learning intention' at the start of the class and congratulates them for their 'excellent learning behaviours'. Gabriel's class teacher uses circle time to invite the children to identify and name their learning styles (he opts for being a mathematical and musical learner, categories that he shares with his mothers at the end of the day). In Abi's secondary school, the formal curriculum and identities on offer relate primarily to learning and exam performance.

We note the traditionally gendered nature of some problematizations of behaviour. In Saffron's school, researcher Lucy observes how 'The teacher comes over and pretends to be cross about wasting school resources. She says she expected better of such *"good girls"*. One particularly shy girl looks ready to cry. I feel for her' (Lucy's notes, our emphasis). Saffron is seen by her teacher as 'too shy to ask for help', and we observe her tidying her table, writing quietly and neatly – but later, Lucy agrees with Saffron: 'she is right, she is not shy in school'. Gabriel's teacher talks to Sue about 'what a lovely chap Gabriel is, and particularly that he seems more in touch with feelings', which feels, on rereading, to be a covert comment on his family context. In Abi's school, girls entertain themselves by distracting and engaging teachers while boys pick up the lion's share of detentions, which are publicly posted for all to see. School uniform becomes the front line of gender trouble, with boys flouting requirements to tuck in shirts and Abi defying the regulation of footwear and ripping holes in her black tights (see Figure 6.5).

There is a sense that teachers must work hard to hold at bay practices that, in their effects, are gendering or sexualizing. Gabriel's teacher uses lol-lypop sticks as a way of disrupting the patterning of children's choices when he wants them to work in pairs or groups. Seating is controlled and calibrated for each lesson, with children moving without comment into different groups, reflecting an obscure personalized learning grid beneath the surface. Yet, there are moments beyond the system, and these are occupied immediately by the children to express other aspects of the informal pupil culture. David is always first and in front if he can be. In Nkosi's school, the boys rush to the climbing frame at break time; this masculine monopolizing of space is only indirectly

FIGURE 6.5 *Abi's tights and officially forbidden Doc Marten boots and mobile phone*

tackled when adults intervene by asking the girls to leave first to give them a head start. Nkosi seems to fall easily into the embodied practices of being one of the boys; we do not notice a desire to be different, but rather, practices of connection and sameness with boys like him.

Wet play (which happens in many of the schools given the time of year we were researching) is an interregnum in which gendered behaviour was observable, with boys clustered around the cartoons and the front of the class and girls occupying the margins. Book time is also a moment of gendered 'self-making', with Saffron choosing *Princess Fairies*, Lucien *Matilda*, and Nkosi and his friend reading identical copies of *Football Crazy* (see Figures 7.2 and 7.3). It is as if the practices of neutralizing gender that have become part and parcel of (at least some) early years settings unintentionally enchant gendered play as a space of informality and intensity (Holland 2003). In Abi's school, the informal spaces between and sometimes within lessons are quickly occupied by young people, used for learning as well as consumption, solidarity and solitary pleasures. Sara observes 'intimate murmurs of female companionship' as girls chat on their way to school, is impressed by the 'pleasure' they take 'in each other's company', and the 'mundane eroticisms' of school friends as they plait each others' hair and trace patterns on their backs outside at lunch time.

It is girls who move in to 'annex' the researcher, engaging in feminine banter about rings, husbands, mothers and hair accessories. Lucy is reminded of the fraught politics of 'sitting next to' rather than 'opposite' others during her observation of Saffron, and is drawn into the attention economy of her friendship group, noting 'Saffron goes straight back to her desk but her friend remains and asks me if I will be going back to Saffron's house afterwards. I say I will be and I look across at Saffron. She looks a bit upset (cross) I presume, because her friend is still sitting with me and she is not'.

In our observations, researchers notice gender around seating and behaviour. Whenever a child is called out by a teacher for bad behaviour, the researcher records their gender and usually too their ethnicity. It seems that this is a latent discourse that touches children too, despite being unmarked in the educational talk of levels and learning: when Rachel 'lets slip' that she saw a child in Lucien's class 'pinching' a 'good behaviour' house token, they immediately grill her: 'was the person black?' and encourage her to 'tell the teacher'. Researchers also observe the gender composition of the tables, attempting to work out when these are patterned by the choices of children (e.g. both Gabriel and Lucien appear to prefer the company of girls) and when they are shaped by deliberate selection – to differentiate by ability (the top set) or to harmonize behaviour (splitting friends apart). Certain children appear to be kept on a very short leash, with their seating and movement surveilled at all times, while others move freely around the classroom. We assume that the teacher's choice of Lucien to fetch and distribute laptops is a sign of favour (this is explored fully in Chapter 10, where we consider how 'researching' operates as a practice that can transcend home and school producing valuable cultural capital). Gender is part of these systems yet, as researchers, we were often left guessing how these systems worked. The times when children can make their own choices about where they were and with whom (playtime and lunch) are especially interesting for us. These might be moments when children effectively disappear from our gaze as, for instance, is the case with Nkosi, who runs off with his two best friends, or when David and his friend go into their own play-world. Or we may be invited to join their free time, as is the case with Lucien, who lets Rachel sit with him and Milly at lunch as they 'pick like humming birds on the sweet bits' of their lunches, or when Gabriel waits for Sue in order to take her into the lunch hall. We are left pondering how far comfort with adult company and attention may be part of a gendered middle-class habitus.

Gender is also visible and noted by researchers in relation to the adults of the school. Descriptions of teachers invariably include age (generally 'young'), gender and ethnicity/ nationality. Researchers comment also on the profile of the teachers in comparison to the support staff, and how they fit within the gender/class/ethnic profile of the school community. Support staff are frequently identified as mothers of children who have passed through the school

and appear to have a connection with the school history that goes beyond the time frame of most teachers and recent processes of gentrification. Rachel reports that she is called 'Miss' in the staff room by teaching assistants who are predominantly mature black working class women. In Gabriel's school, Sue comments on how young, fashionable and white the teachers all seem to be, but that this is 'no surprise'. In Abi's school, Sara observes how teachers all develop their own gendered styles, which range from the 'bluff, tough, macho' to the 'sharp/acerbic'.

We sometimes notice connections between the formal and informal gender regimes. For example, David's class are working with the myth of the Minotaur as a project that bridges different lessons and extends into homework. In an impromptu drama lesson, pupils are invited to imagine and sense the spaces through which the Minotaur moves, an invitation that is taken up by David and friends to imagine a cave full of 'lumps of lava, dead people, blood dripping' – echoing the violent motifs of their break-time games which revolve around a running boy who we are told is 'a bomb about to go off'. Classwork on Ted Hughes's book *The Iron Man*, discussed in Chapter 7, might be read as engaging with the vulnerability of masculinity as well as of the school system as a whole, as we read it there.

The particular character of the school setting is always significant. Researcher Sue's description of a religious education class at Nkosi's inner city Catholic primary school captures a sense of the dense interaction of formal and informal school cultures, official and unofficial knowledges, and behavioural and pedagogic techniques. The class begins with the (white Irish woman) teacher quizzing the pupils (who are predominantly male and non-white) about 'the kind of people God wants us to be'. Sue observes that 'The children quite like this and there are several hands up to contribute. For example, T talks about Nelson Mandela and how he got white and black together, another mentions the 10 commandments'. During the lesson, the children are invited to talk about this question and about 'the creation story' in pairs; later, they all move to different tables for this lesson in another configuration whose logic is obscure to the researcher. Some children get to put their names up on the circles for 'sitting and listening well'; two others (including T) are punished for allegedly fighting and have to sit on the carpet facing the board. Their work on the Beatitudes involves using the interactive board as well as worksheets to link the first ('Blessed are ...') and last ('for they shall ...') parts correctly, drawing pictures relating to the Beatitudes that they are told will be going into 'God's Garden'. Nkosi, for his part, seems a little distracted – 'I notice Nkosi is fiddling with a small tin of Vaseline, which he occasionally uses on his nose' – and when he and another boy are given a picture of a (white) woman weeping and a (black) woman comforting her to illustrate the Beatitude 'Blessed are those that mourn, for they shall be comforted', they 'trace the picture onto a blank sheet instead of doing their own interpretations'. At midday, 'They all line up for lunch and Miss M gives a

religious blessing' (Sue's notes). We are struck by the saturation of this educational scene by raced and classed as well as gendered signifiers and meanings.

Schools outside the mainstream appear to work along different lines. Researcher Liam notes the following revealing moment as part of Sean's day:

J spots that Sean is looking intently at the Teaching Assistant (TA) and points out that his eyes are fixed on her cleavage. The TAs joke a little about this and Sean doesn't seem to mind or notice. J tells me that he is just a normal thirteen-year-old boy.

Fabricating 'ordinary' childhoods at school is a visible part of the gender work taking place around Sean, and involves constructing and permitting the expression of (normative) gender and sexuality that, in mainstream schools, is both warded off and institutionalized. His school uses popular culture deliberately in order to connect to and construct a sense of ordinary teenage experience for children whose disabilities and communication problems may isolate them within families and institutions. Music videos and YouTube material are actively used as a tool of connection and communication with the young people, as adults seek to connect the young people with a common culture of 'teenagehood', marked heavily by heterosexual identifications.

Fifteen-year-old Jasmine's specialist unit for teenage mothers with babies provides a different kind of example of the fissures and fault lines between gender, sexuality, formal and informal curricula. Students openly watch and laugh at Vines such as 'don't look at my girlfriend'. Although not officially permitted, this content provokes neither comment nor intervention on the part of teachers. In fact, these signifiers of a gendered and sexualized teenage culture seem to be positively welcomed in a space where what is marginalized is the young women's status as mothers. Dropping their babies at the nursery first thing, the young women move into a space in which they are constructed as teenagers and as learners rather than mothers, and popular culture appears to be a key resource in this process (for a full discussion of this, see Chapter 3).

Days in a life outside school: Gender cultures beyond categories?

Nathan, Aliyah and Funmi opted to be followed on non-school days. As we explore in Chapters 2 and 10, as a genre 'day in a life' was not unfamiliar to teenage participants, being a popular YouTube form (235 million returns for 'day in a life' on YouTube at the time of writing). Those young people, who shared a day outside of school time, could be expected to offer a much more crafted version of themselves to the researcher, but this did not necessarily

seem to be the case: Nathan invites Liam to join him at his Saturday morning football game, but rather than this being a demonstration of 'hegemonic' masculine physical prowess, Liam observes him enjoying the game without being particularly fit or athletic. In Liam's observation of Aliyah's day, questions of ethnicity and religion are foregrounded in his descriptions of headscarves and prayer time alongside Aliyah's interest in YouTube, Twitter and popular music cultures; and this contrasts with her own 'day in a life' (as we discuss in Chapter 3), where she downplays difference in favour of a version of herself more aligned with a globalized teen culture.

However, Funmi's day is fascinating in this respect as it appears to showcase her current interest in all things Japanese. Spent largely sitting on her sofa, plugged into her iPad by earphone, Liam the researcher observes Funmi move from a homework task for her Japanese language GCSE that involves watching and practising Japanese grammar; watching a behind the scenes documentary about the creation and timelines of the complex Zelda series of games; listening to a Korean pop star whose music is used in anime; and then catching up on her latest anime series Naruto. Funmi explains that she is seen as a 'geek' by her friends, an identity that seems to be associated with a tendency towards collecting and esoteric knowledge about her specialist subject. However, knowing a lot about anime seems to be very different to knowing a lot about One Direction or Union J, offering up an apparently androgynous and prosocial geek identity rather than the perversity of the fangirl. Nathan also shares his interest in anime as part of his 'day in a life' observation, including a sketch book in which he draws characters and a slideshow animation of a fight scene that he is constructing on his iPad. This is just one of a wide range of cultural interests he shares – others include loom band making (he insists Liam takes a photo of the one he made from the kit his mum gave him), boxing, kickboxing, trombone playing, graffiti art. In an overview of the Otaku culture that includes anime, Mizuko Ito reveals the complexity and capacious character of this transnational peer-to-peer fan culture, arguing that it shows a 'dynamic tension between democratic inclusiveness and highly specialised distinction' (Ito 2012: xvii). In contrast to more everyday and embodied forms of gender available to both Funmi and Nathan (including knitting, sport and family practices and roles), connecting to 'Japanese Cool' provides a parallel universe of meaning that is both easily accessed (and shared), comfortably alien and socially valued by others.

Temporalizing gender: What the 'day in a life' method enables us to see

What does the 'day in a life' method make visible in terms of gender? Perhaps most dramatically, at school it enables us to see how a 'son' or a 'daughter'

becomes a pupil, a friend, a learner, part of extensive systems which make it harder for us to hold them in view – the child is eclipsed by a foregrounding of behaviour management techniques and assessment frameworks. In that respect, the method reveals something of how we are incorporated differently into distinctive spaces, technologies and pedagogies between which we move over the course of a day. Some of these travel with us, some are context-specific, while others operate to connect or divide. This certainly pushes back against the essentializing or ‘fixing’ tendencies of some single-sited research into boys’ and girls’ lives.

As researchers, we are overwhelmed by the intensity of the primary school classroom, criss-crossed by personalized learning grids and behavioural pedagogies which seem to both obscure and incite performances of gender, class and race (see Renold 2005, also Kirby, 2018 forthcoming). We gain a sense of the gender regime as layered, with each stratum requiring decoding, and of eruptions emerging at the fissures between formal and informal curriculum and all around the researcher as she moves disruptively through the space.

The ‘day in a life’ method also helps us gain a sense of home and school as relational spaces, which may be bridged by practices and pedagogies (as explored by Walkerdine and Lucey 1989) or by opposition, providing spaces for recovery or exile (see Gillies 2016). We understand ourselves as implicated in this relationship, adults without a clear role, comprehending the children in our view both as individuals, but also as categories, instances of something more general (like gender, class, race). We wonder how teachers who are also parents straddle these two ways of understanding the child (Thomson & Kehily 2011).

The ‘day in a life’ method involves a negotiation between researcher and researched as to what is observed and noted. With teenage participants, this is more anxiously negotiated than with our younger panellists, and where young people have documented their own days, we are able to gain a sense of what they choose to show to a wider gaze. Comparing these accounts conveys a sense of how gender and other structural categories may come in and out of view depending on whose gaze is privileged – the idea captured in our title ‘now you see it, now you don’t’.

Now you see it, now you don’t?

Sex/gender is a category that is both analytic and everyday, taken for granted and contested, abstract and concrete, extensive and intensive, intimate and institutionalized. As feminist researchers, we are invested in gender, in revealing/creating as well as documenting and celebrating the creativity and beauty that can surround the work of gender (Nkosi and his friend reading their identical football books together, see Figure 7.2). We are also positioned in and

complicit with times and places, refreshing our perspectives with the latest theories or accepting the problems that policies define for unpicking.

We have tried to bring this methodological and conceptual reflexivity into how we think about data such as these. Methodologies are tools with material affordances. Interviews incite narrative. Observations privilege practices. Psychosocial methods elevate emotions and our reactions if we choose to record them. Multimedia approaches can alert us to sounds and the physical environment. Methods also centre and displace actors as we are asked to show or tell how we see the world.

The two methods outlined in this chapter made gender visible in quite different ways. The 'favourite things' method drew us into domestic spaces and object worlds. By asking about special objects, we were also told about the special people and places to which the objects connected them, and about the complicated relationalities that they materialized and evoked. We were shown what you could do with objects: playing, collecting, treasuring, mastering, forgetting. This method drew us into the world of commercial toys and markets, yet also demonstrated how market relations are quickly displaced by personal relations. The gendered play to which the method gave us access spoke more about the deployment of cultural resources into personal and familial projects than the commodification or sexualization of childhood. So too, Megan's swift cycling through gender identity projects (from Moshi to One Direction and away again) and participating simultaneously in what might be seen contradictory ones (majoretting and football), was able to suggest how 'sexualized' practices do not necessarily or permanently mark those who engage in them.

Gender (including the body) is a situation that is dynamic, that has reflexivity; the child is entangled, part of relational webs (families, peers, neighbourhoods, institutional systems, pedagogies, markets). But there are also disconnects, disassociations and misrecognitions rather than the certainties of linear connections assumed by popular discourse. Gender was present and contested within domestic spaces as part of a family culture, situated parenting projects, sibling negotiations and friendship gambits. By following children from home to school and back again, the 'day in a life' method enabled us to make sense of the different spaces of children's lives relationally – understanding them as dynamic beings positioned differently in changing environments, moving in and out of our focus, through different institutional frames. This alerted us to the question of when and where gender becomes visible, when it is named, by whom and to what effect. For example, we were able to see how the school simultaneously evokes and obscures gender, with children asserting gendered difference and solidarity in response. Equally, when participants resist conventionally gendered projects through their more self-consciously 'gender fluid' ones, we could identify how these evoke classed

differences too. Our two approaches produce mundane accounts of the work of gender in everyday lives. These are not the spectacles of sexualization that dominate public discourse, but rather, small examples of gender coming into and out of view. They do so in ways that raise questions about the temporalities and spatialities shaping the environments within which children live, and how digital cultures saturate and structure these in new ways, giving rise to extensities as children become part of wider data grids, but also to intensities as the affordances of new digital devices are incorporated into play, growth and connection.