Methodological Awareness in Feminist Research: Reclaiming Experiences of Hostility in Workplace Studies

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Abstract
This article extends contemporary debates on gender, sexuality, and power by exploring how power relations play out through the researcher–researched relationship in male-dominated workplaces. Drawing on short-term ethnography, this article discusses the utility of analyzing the researcher’s embodied field in feminist research and advances our knowledge of body politics through the exploration of workplace performances. Specifically, it draws upon the author’s research encounters with 33 men working in an Australian metropolitan fire service. The analysis demonstrates the strengths of using reflexive bodily accounts as forms of data and makes suggestions toward greater methodological awareness around the intersection of masculine authority, heterosexuality, and embodied feminist research.

Keywords
methods in qualitative inquiry, feminist research, observational research, micro-ethnography, narrative

Introduction
This article focuses on gendered subjectivity, research vulnerabilities, and the methodological possibilities of utilizing hostile research encounters as a research method within organizational studies and contemporary studies of workplace cultures (Baird, 2018; Figenschou, 2010; Friedman & Orrù, 1991; Griffin, 2012). While some work has been conducted in feminist qualitative research (see Dickson-Swift, Erica, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007; Gurney, 2003; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Reeves, 2010; Soyer, 2014), the application of this approach is still underdeveloped and rarely utilized in organizational sociology, where the use of reflexive bodily accounts as method would be invaluable. As female researchers entering male-dominated settings, we are frequently made aware of our status as outsiders (Griffin, 2012; Lawthom, 1997) and tokens (Kanter, 1977a; Letherby & Zdrodowski, 1995) through various hostilities—and at times, through unwanted sexual advances. While this is indicative of broader gendered power relations that position women in male-dominated settings as inferior, our ability to identify and centralize these experiences of hostility as forms of embodied subjective data will improve methodological awareness in feminist research (Gurney, 1985, p. 46).

Acknowledging the methodological and analytical strengths of analyzing hostile research encounters is also important in understanding how certain bodies are differentiated socially. Such an approach liberates the richness of the methodological challenges female researchers face and outlines examples of less overt, symbolic forms of violence (Lawthom, 1997; Lundström, 1987). Symbolic violence is characterized as power that is “exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 167). Sexual harassment for instance is a powerful form of symbolic violence as it is multilayered and embedded within the context of a broader hierarchy of power and authority. Ultimately, these gendered power relations encourage the internalization and normalization of sexual harassment, which leaves survivors of symbolic violence asking whether they were perhaps “too sensitive” to these encounters (Hinze, 2004).

This article deliberately conceptualizes violence as multifaceted and wide-ranging while simultaneously acknowledging that certain forms of violence are camouflaged through everyday performances, interactions, and workplace cultures

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(Wadham, 2013). The strengths of this approach are underarticulated in feminist research, and experiences of sexism and hostility remain so familiar to female researchers that they risk becoming commonplace and taken for granted (Gurney, 1985). By uncovering the gendered power relations that play out through the researcher–researched relationship (see also Letherby & Zdrodowski, 1995), I attempt to analyze workplace performances and their role in reproducing the gender order in male-dominated workplaces. Drawing on short-term ethnography and my reflexive encounters with research participants, this article shows how women are treated as disrespected others in these workplaces (see also Griffin, 2012; Orrico, 2015).

Being a Feminist Researcher in Male-Dominated Spaces

It is important that I start by acknowledging my subject positions as both a woman and as a feminist interviewing and observing 33 men in the fire industry (Harding, 1992; Nilan, 2002; Smith, 2005), which remains heavily male dominated and covertly hostile toward racial and gender reform (see Allison, 2014; Baigent, 2001; Childs, 2006; Goldberg, 2017). The significance of these subject positions is notable in that they are both contextualized as lacking authoritative capital within masculine cultures and social settings due to the “feminist stigma” (Anastasopoulos & Desmarais, 2015, p. 227). The feminist stigma suggests that feminism is viewed as an unfavorable social position to hold due to negative stereotypes associated with the label. The lack of authoritative capital (Gurney, 1985) assigned to these subject positions usually results in resistance to female researchers who enter male-dominated cultures and workplaces (Gurney, 2003).

My subject position—as the daughter of a firefighter—provided me with some protection from “outsider” status in this research environment, which is discussed in greater detail below. The standoff points of the researchers and those being researched are of vital significance in feminist research (Smith, 2005). The term “insider” for instance has a problematic history, as the term is commonly used to assert authenticity and through the binary understanding of the “native” and the “insider” (Butz, 2010, p. 149). I use the terms “insider” and “quasi-insider” in this article to help demonstrate the boundaries in which I was placed and subsequently occupied rather than as claims to authenticity. As McDowell (2010, p. 158) argues, the interactions between the researcher and the researched, as well as the standpoint and characteristics of the researcher, are often ignored as though they play no part in the collection and analysis of data. While the “firefighter’s daughter” frame allowed me—at times—to be seen as both nonthreatening and in need of protection, this quasi-insider position did not protect against the research vulnerabilities of symbolic violence. The issue of my father’s connection to the fire service was often addressed by the participants as a way of reiterating my acceptance as a quasi-insider. My social position as the “firefighter’s daughter” resulted in other firefighters assuming that I had cultural and symbolic capital within this field due to my upbringing around the culture. This afforded me some access that might have otherwise been restricted.

Research Method and Organizational Access

Industrialized fire services are situated within a particular sociocultural history that has deeply fetishized its male workers. Male firefighters are consistently portrayed as the heterosexual heroes of society in popular culture, and while they may lack the economic success and formal political power typical of hegemonic masculinity, the gendered power relations embedded in this history continue to inform public perceptions and firefighters’ workplace performances. This history also helps explain why fire services struggle to achieve gender and racial reform, as these sociocultural dimensions inform the often taken-for-granted workplace cultures.

The methodological strengths of examining the sociocultural dimensions of Australian fire services cultures were recently addressed in an independent review of Queensland Fire and Emergency Services. The independent review stated that Australian metropolitan fire services are “at best, awkward about and unprepared for the inclusion of women in its ranks, and, at worst, actively and overtly hostile” (Allison, 2014, p. 33). This research utilizes a case study approach that incorporates elements of short-term ethnography, thus allowing for an analysis of how men negotiate their masculinities during working hours (Handwerker, 2001; Pink & Morgan, 2013, p. 352), and thus provides insight into how these cultures are reproduced through seemingly mundane everyday interactions. Short-term ethnography (Pink, 2008; Pink & Morgan, 2013), which includes observations, interactions, and interviews, is particularly useful in workplace studies, where long-term fieldwork is not sustainable.

It is notable that very few studies look at the everyday interactions of firefighters during working hours (see Baigent, 2001; Desmond, 2008), and even less attention is paid to the gendered power relations that transpire within the researcher—researched dialogue. The sample for this study includes 33 male firefighters positioned in different ranks within the service, ranging from firefighters, senior firefighters, station officers, peer support officers, and commanders. It was imperative that different ranks, which hold different positions of power within the service, be included in the study.

My subject position as the daughter of a firefighter was used to initiate conversations with various members of the service, which secured an informal meeting with a key member of the United Firefighters Union. The United Firefighters Union, the chief officer, and assistant chief officer then negotiated the parameters of the study. It was evident at the beginning of this project that the chief officer and assistant chief officer were attempting to control the visibility of men’s fraternal relations within these stations. I was informed that “grumpy stations” were not appropriate to study as they could potentially show hostility toward the research project—or worse, result in direct hostility toward myself as a researcher. When I informed the officers that these work environments would be important to
explore, I was firmly informed that these research sites would not be included in the parameters of the research project. Overnight stays were similarly restricted from the ethnographic project, and contact with station officers was arranged at the discretion of the human resources department and upper-level management.

Members of the United Firefighters Union expressed concerns that the service would likely attempt to hide issues of harassment and sexism by controlling the parameters of the research. These attempts were later confirmed during a meeting with the officers, when the word “gender” in the title of the study prompted a tense conversation. The officers believed that the study of gender would lead to potential legal ramifications in light of sexual harassment claims from women working in another Australian metropolitan fire service (see Allison, 2014). The officers were comforted when I explained that “gender” also related to how men manage their relationships with other men.

Despite multiple attempts by officers to manage and protect against research vulnerabilities, I experienced numerous hostilities as the result of being a female researcher inside these male-dominated work cultures. A total of four stations were visited over the course of 3 months, which allowed time to ride inside fire trucks as well as share in routine lunches and dinners. Experiences of hostility were documented and analyzed using a combination of manual (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software using NVivo (version 11). The analysis showed how less overt, symbolic violence was enacted and normalized within these masculinist cultures. While these acts of hostility attempted to restrict access to participants and limit the viability of observational work, it was through the process of becoming methodologically aware that I was able to reclaim these experiences of hostility and utilize reflexive bodily accounts as forms of data.

### Becoming Methodologically Aware

This article draws on my encounters with 33 full-time male firefighters in an Australian metropolitan fire service, though it is notable that this article is also informed by my previous research encounters with female firefighters in the same service. My interest in male-dominated workplaces was peaked when I explored the contradictory accounts of exclusion and inclusion experienced by women working in these services (see Perrott, 2016). I developed a deep fascination with the occupation, experiencing a conflicting loyalty to the fire service while simultaneously recognizing the incongruent relationship it appeared to hold in relation to power and gender minorities. The findings from the first study helped identify some of the tensions operating in the service, though I had originally discounted reflexive bodily accounts as forms of qualitative data. The following account provides a striking example of how the power relations play out through the researcher–researched relationship and the potentially powerful insight that these embodied accounts can provide:

I was sitting in my car, which was parked half a block away from the small metropolitan fire station I had visited earlier that day, when my phone began to ring. It was the women I had just interviewed. She started our conversation with an apologetic sigh and awkward laughter, specifying that her male colleagues insisted she call me. “They have two questions for you,” she continued, “first, how old are you? and secondly, are you single?” Before the call ended we laughed and shared in the absurdity of the interactions that we had encountered. Earlier that day several male firefighters entered our interview space to offer coffee and tea. The woman informed me that she believed these seemingly thoughtful gestures were veiled attempts to see my face and judge my attractiveness. She then notified me that the men had become obsessively preoccupied with the prospect of an unfamiliar woman entering their fire station. (Day Shift, Early June, 2012)

I had—at the time of this interaction—overlooked the gendered power relations embedded in this conversation, which devalued and delegitimized my professional status as a researcher and reduced me to an object that facilitated homosocial bonding. I also excused this jarring experience, neglecting to appreciate the striking patterns of sexism and harassment in relation to broader masculinist cultures produced across other Western metropolitan fire services (see Allison, 2014). My previous involvement with the service drew my attention to the methodological possibilities of exploring these work cultures during working hours rather than abstracting from a distance in order to better understand the intertwining differences and similarities between tokens and dominants (see also Yoder & Aniakudo, 1997).

### Identifying Organized Silence as a Form of Symbolic Violence

The personal accounts analyzed in this article are intended to inform a broader understanding of how women are positioned in the symbolic order and the ways in which women are resisted through insider discourses that delegitimize their ability to engage in placemaking in these contexts (Pink, 2009; Pink, 2012). This was often enacted through organized silence that aimed to recreate the complicity of those subordinated in this interactional context. The two forms of organized silence that were experienced can be explained through Kanter’s (1977b) theory of token disadvantage. Kanter (1977b, p. 969) argues that token’s experience disadvantage when “the token’s social category (master status) is physically obvious, as in the case of sex” and also when “the token’s social type is not only rare but also new to the setting of the dominants.” A striking example of organized silence can be read in the first interaction I had with operational firefighters at a busy metropolitan fire station, though multiple examples ensued. What follows is a condensed account derived from the data collected on the first station visit for this study. This account follows from an address I made to a large group of firefighters immediately after the acting commander requested the participants’ attention:
During my address, several men continued their conversations but shifted their bodies closer towards each other, while others started completely new conversations. The lack of eye contact was both uncomfortable and unsettling and it became quite apparent that I was unable to command their full attention; this was later supported when one man, jokingly asked, “so what did you say the study was about before? I wasn’t really listening.” During my address, one man looked at me for a brief moment before quickly looking away with a stern expression. Once I had finished my address, the commander stepped forward again and asked, “who would be willing to be involved?” The space fell completely silent. Some men had folded arms while others casually leaned back on poles and surrounding structures whilst shifting their gaze. As the seconds passed some of the men’s lips started to pull, forming a slight smirk. As the lapse in time increased, the amount of smirks in the space swelled, with the men now tracing the room with their eyes as if to challenge the men to continue the now compounding, uncomfortable silence. The tension in this space was uncomfortable, confronting, and isolating—this was largely the point of these performances. (Day Shift, Mid April, 2015)

This cluster of interactions shows the power of insider discourses and the authority this group of men had to frame individuals as outsiders through this symbolic order (Ridgeway, 2009). While this cluster of interactions may not—at least on first glance—seem significant, it was also the first sign that the firefighters were resistant toward the study. As Figenschou (2010) argues, it is important to address the hostilities, gatekeeping, and censorship that women encounter in their research of patriarchal organizations. By addressing these experiences, we can “increase methodological awareness” about the power relations that exist within these interactions (Figenschou, 2010, p. 913). The reactions from the firefighters in that station were so hostile that it even prompted concerns that no firefighters would be willing to participate in the study. Despite this concern, I was later fortunate enough to be recognized by a firefighter who had met me many years ago when I was still a child, which sparked a conversation that prompted the first round of interviews.

While my quasi-insider status did afford me some research mobility, the firefighters were deliberate in their attempts to remind me of my status as an outsider. During lunch at the same station, I was again reminded that I held little authority in this masculine space. The firefighters formed a line, serving up their lunch onto plates, and then proceeding to join their colleagues in the firefighters’ mess. I had served up a plate of steamed carrots, cauliflower, and peas alongside some crispy oiled potato chunks, leaving out the thick sections of marinated steak. Sitting at the table with a group of six men, I ate the steamed carrots and cauliflower. My steak remained untouched as one of the firefighters at the opposite end of the table stared at me engaging with my food. The firefighter then stood up and walked back into the kitchen area, returning moments later with a butter knife that he placed next to me. Most firefighters at the table had a knife and fork, which they used to carve the meat into smaller, edible chunks. The man was silent, staring at the butter knife. He then raised his chin and looked at my steak, gestured with his head that the knife was used to cut the meat. I said, “oh I don’t eat meat.” Many of the men stopped eating their food and exchanged looks with one another, with some of the men lifting their bottom lips and raising their eyebrows. The man who walked into the kitchen to retrieve the butter knife then commented, “now would be a great time to start.”

The aforementioned example of hostility shows another public demonstration of resistance toward femaleness and femininity as experienced through the lens of being a female researcher in a male-dominated workplace. While it is well established that meat eating in Western industrialized cultures is often used to reaffirm hegemonic masculinity (Nath, 2011; Rogers, 2008; Stibbe, 2004), this interaction extends beyond associations with primitivism, hunting, protein, and muscles. The interaction was yet another public performance of dominance and symbolic control aimed at establishing the authority of the men’s collective knowledge and eating practices. The comment hinted at a transgression to adhere to the form of hegemonic masculinity practiced within this station and a requirement to be complicit in this subordination. Other performances of dominance and symbolic control were often enacted in the form of exaggerated heterosexual masculinity, which again required that an audience witness the practice.

Exposing Sexual Harassment as Part of the Workplace Culture

Overt experiences of unwanted sexual advances were also encountered during the research project, demonstrating incisively the way that men’s fraternal relations rely upon another to sustain itself. It is notable that I was frequently positioned as a spectator of exaggerated heterosexual masculinities (Kanter, 1977b) during instances of storytelling. The examples of humor provided in this section can be understood as sophomoric in nature, in that they involve crude jokes, name-calling, adolescent pranks, and exaggerated heterosexuality, typical in men’s fraternal relations (Wadham, 2013).

One example of exaggerated heterosexual masculinity occurred in conversation with two station officers, who were explaining how firefighters acquire nicknames at work. Quinn and Marty explained that firefighters often receive nicknames if they have “messed up” in some way. The storytelling started with Quinn, who explained that one firefighter is called “biscuit” because he is unreliable and flaky to work with. Another example was a firefighter who had been given the nickname “slippery” after breaking his ankle going down “the fireman’s pole” during a hazing incident where he had been soaked with water. Marty added, “the name sticks the more you complain about it.” After listing a number of nicknames and their origins, Marty and Quinn started to discuss “a legend” among the firefighters. Quinn carefully tried to recall the story of a generational firefighter who was prewarned that firefighters get given nicknames in the service. The firefighter burst through the doors of the Busy Bee station on his first day at the
job and said loudly, “now I’ll just be honest, I have something embarrassing about myself… and before you all jump on me, I’ll just say what it is.” Marty started laughing as he realized what story Quinn was referencing. Quinn continued, “I don’t like it about myself and I don’t want the nickname but here it goes. I have a huge dick and massive balls.”

The example with Marty and Quinn is indicative of the ways in which heterosexual masculinity is celebrated in the service. Similar dramatized stories of men standing up to superiors, stealing other firefighters’ wives, or hazing other men were commonly put on for my benefit as a researcher. Many of these instances were performed to test my acceptance of the male culture being presented. The significance of Quinn’s choice to draw on a story that involved male genitalia was also compelling. Quinn and Marty believed this firefighter had claimed masculine authority through his gender practices, with Marty commenting, “I wish I had done that.” As Kanter (1977b, p. 975) argues, members often “reaffirm shared in-group understandings by emphasizing and exaggerating those cultural elements which they share in contrast to the token.” By emphasizing the dominance of men’s bodies as legitimate in the context of their work, Quinn and Marty were able to place me in the audience of their interaction, making me a spectator to their male culture. As Cook (2005) and Connell (1995, p. 54) explain, penis size is often used as a symbol of power in the achievement of Western heteronorm masculinity. The men believed that this firefighter was able to protect his masculinity through his ability to “play the game,” with acceptable humor about the dominant male body.

The use of sophomoric, heterosexual humor functions by destabilizing perceived feminized gender practices and reinforcing the hegemony of straight men over gay masculinities. In doing so, the men were able to show subtle verbal displays of “rough-and-tumble” in order to define their masculine authority and distance themselves from the homoeroticism of living with other men. As Kehily and Nayak (1997, p. 72) argue, these displays are common in school settings and are indicative of the boundary settings of appropriate masculinities. Similar to adolescent boys in schools, these deliberate displays of rejection toward homosocial intimacy help the men establish heterosexual masculinities.

Another example of symbolic control occurred during my first night visit to one of the smaller metropolitan fire stations, where a station officer performed exaggerated heterosexual masculinity to assert his dominance. After introducing myself to the two men in the office, I was asked, “so why are you studying Firies?” I responded by discussing the study and then disclosing that my father was a firefighter, which led to an interest in the culture. The firefighter, who first had his arms crossed around his chest, soon opened up his body by loosening his arms and smiling. He then exaggeratedly looked at my body up and down and said, “there is NO way you’re [firefighter’s name] daughter.” He proceeded to laugh, nudged the firefighter to his right and said “no offense to your parents.” Another example, which followed a similar script, involved a firefighter jokingly stating, “your mum must be really hot.”

Understanding How Complicity Is Fostered in the Workplace

These examples show how everyday sexual harassment is taken for granted in these male-dominated workplaces and how our acknowledgment of their existence in research settings can uncover how complicity is fostered in the workplace through fraternality, homosocial bonding (Cheng, 1996; Loy, 1995; Wadham, 2017). It also shows the ways in which heterosexuality is used to signify masculine authority (Connell, 1987; Dean, 2013; Frank, 1987; Pascoe, 2005; Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001). The purpose of these comments is to extend the privilege of masculinity by rendering women in this context as sexual objects for the male gaze. According to Mulvey (1989, p. 19), the male gaze requires that women be “simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.” These examples of sexual objectification set the tone for boundary management, unequal power relations, and heterosexual masculinity at these stations and problematize the agency of female researchers in this context. It also shows an example of performance pressure, which Kanter (1977b, p. 973) refers to as the “attention to a token’s discrepant characteristics.” Rather than being read as an academic or a researcher in this context, my interactions were largely understood in relation to my physical appearance.

Another example of the complicit acceptance of sexual harassment occurred during a day visit to a small outstation. The station officer in charge tried to initiate the interviews without offering a tour of the station saying, “so you can do your interviews in here,” pointing toward the office. One of the senior firefighters in the kitchen commented, “let her sit first,” offering me a coffee shortly after. I accepted the offer and sat at the table with the men. After a light conversation about the study, one of the firefighters brought over a coffee and said, “I haven’t put a love heart or a phone number of here like other people do.” Confused on the phrasing, I clarified, “on the coffee?” to which he replied, “yeah, like they do in the coffee shops when a hot girl is there.”

This example shows another instance of exaggerated heterosexual masculinity as well as the complicit silence that this form of hegemonic masculinity requires. None of the firefighters at the table remarked about the comment and continued to treat the situation as though it was common practice. As Acker (1990, p. 153) argues, a critical component of hegemonic masculinity requires that men prove their sexual potency. Similarly, Connell (1995, p. 123) explains that the practices of masculinization initiate “experiences of the body that define females as other, and shapes desire as desire for the other.” The examples given thus far suggest that heterosexual masculinity is central to the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity in the context of this service and that its prevalence and reproduction relies on the complicity of those who observe the interaction—which included my complicit involvement in the organized silence. While I was—at times—afforded kindness and hospitality by some firefighters, larger group interactions often
resulted in deliberate and exaggerated displays of heterosexuality that often mitigated earlier interactions with the same individuals. These experiences indicate that women’s treatment within these services relates to the use of sophomoric humor operating more broadly, which systemically generates a symbolic order in which women are consequently placed.

The performative nature of hegemonic masculinity often resulted in the firefighters deliberately putting on a show of their heterosexual masculinity for the benefit of other men. During a visit to the busy metropolitan fire station, I was seated in the firefighters’ mess while taking notes. This seating position was advantageous as it allowed me to neither be seen nor heard by the participants while they interacted in the kitchen and adjacent rooms. Consequently, the men’s voices would often wrap around the brick wall that partially separated the two joining rooms. One participant said to another firefighter, “are you going to the gym now?” The two men laughed while the firefighter said, “shut up.” The firefighter continued saying, “lots of motivation today!” The two men laughed and then fell silent as one of the men leaned his head back with flushed cheeks to see whether I had left the room after lunch. The firefighter quickly sprung his head behind the brick wall after noticing that I could hear their interaction.

These interactions show how that as a female researcher in this context, I was often used to facilitate the imperatives of hegemonic masculinity, which, as the aforementioned examples show, often occurred as a product of the culture rather than a result of my presence. While some firefighters used my presence to perform exaggerated masculinity, other firefighters believed that my presence had had the opposite effect, resulting in firefighters being on “their best behavior.” As one firefighter explained, “It’s probably a bit tamer when you’re here.” While “being on their best behavior” was often believed to be a show of respect toward women, these comments often originated from the belief that men and women are intrinsically different:

You change the way you speak, obviously when there’s just blokes you tend to be a little more open, you call people things... well, it’s all with jest and joking. [U]ntil you get to know that female, “well I better not” because they might take it the wrong way. I guess also, not that you do [it] a lot but you come into work and you might have a shower in the morning or a shower in the afternoon after being in the gym, so you’ve just got to be a bit more careful with privacy. (Trevor, Senior Firefighter, 11 years’ experience)

Similarly to many of the other firefighters at his station, Trevor commented that women are welcome in the service, only to then contradict these comments by emphasizing the perceived differences of men and women’s bodies and sense of humor. To illuminate these differences, Trevor mentioned the danger of heterosexual attraction by posing the potential threat of a woman seeing a naked man at work. Similarly, other firefighters commented that their wives do not like the idea of them working with other women, suggesting that the intimacy of their work environments would inevitably lead to heterosexual tension and attraction. In these instances, the perceived risks of femaleness and femininity extend beyond polluting the homosocial bonds of men to the defilement of the nuclear family. Women are seen in this context to be sexually polluted (Douglas, 1966) and troubling (McDowell, 2001, p. 183) as well as risking the “family man occupational identity” that the firefighters often emphasized.

**Discussion**

The findings suggest that I held two positions within this research context. At times, I was placed as an observer of heterosexual masculinity, when men would boast about their sexual prowess. Other times, however, I was made observable through comments about my body and appearance. Being made observable was a common practice aimed at ostracizing and othering individuals who did not conform to the practices of masculinity that were favored in the service. The analysis shows that there is an expectation that women and men comply with the current accepted strategy of hegemonic masculinity in the fire services by allowing themselves to be observable if they are placed at the bottom of the symbolic gender order. As Faulkner (2009, p. 180) argues, women in male-dominated spaces are often expected to fit into the male culture by passively accepting sexual jokes while simultaneously ensuring that they do not lose their femininity. However, as this article suggests, femininity and femaleness is also viewed as a potential threat, potentially placing women in an impossible position within the symbolic order (Perrott, 2016; Yoder & Aniakudo, 1997).

Complicit acceptance of their male culture was often demanded publicly, through public demonstrations of dominance and through public displays of heterosexual masculinity. My complicit silence in these interactions was a consequence of the research–participant dialogue, where I knowingly allowed myself to be an observer of the culture. This complicit silence was also a consequence of the tensions that resulted from these interactions. It is notable that the demonstrations of dominance fostered an expectation of silence around these experiences, as though speaking up was a transgression to the culture and a sign of disrespect toward the humor to which they were accustomed. I was often tested to see whether I could tolerate and be complicit in the exaggerated displays of male culture. As the literature on men and masculinities argues, heterosexual humor is often used to facilitate masculine identities rooted in the hegemonic project (Anderson, 2009; Connell, 1995; Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 69). As Pascoe (2005) argues, teasing and homophobic slurs inform social order by exaggerating heterosexuality as the normative practice. This type of humor instills fear in other men that they too can be judged for their sexuality and need to ensure that they “perform” their gender and sexuality within the normative boundaries—or risk being the subject of sacrifice for the sake of humor.

The importance of reflexive accounts of female researchers in the context of male-dominated workplaces is paramount to our continued understanding of the reproduction of masculinist
cultures. It also sheds light onto the gendered power relations that might not be visible in organizations where access to women’s lived experiences is restricted through organizational resistance. As Kehily and Nayak (1997, p. 69) argue, we do not exist in a world where discrimination and objectification can always be acutely measured and defined in tangible ways. As a female research exploring gender relations in male-dominated workplaces, I was made acutely aware of my visibility throughout fieldwork interactions.

This article shows how the participants affirmed their legitimacy through the reproduction of heterosexual masculinity and through complicit silence when witnessing sexual harassment. Interestingly, while many firefighters commented on the tameness of their interactions, several exchanges instead suggested that the firefighters were embellishing their masculine authority and heterosexual masculinity as a result of my presence. The comment about being motivated to go to the gym illuminates the impact of gender relations in the relational context of research conducted in male-dominated workplaces.

Conclusion

The power relations embedded in the research–participant dialogue are deserving of greater attention in studies of male-dominated workplaces. Through deep engagement with reflexive bodily accounts, this article illuminated how female researchers can occupy, sometimes simultaneously, two positions within the research context. The first position frames women as the observers of male culture. I was reminded of this position through repeated acts of organized silence (Katila & Meriläinen, 1999), such as the deliberate collective act of silence enacted during my first meeting with the firefighters. The second position frames women as observable, where the body becomes highly visible and potentially sexualized (see also Figenschou, 2010; Gurney, 2003). This sexualization occurs for the purpose of reproducing the specific form of hegemonic masculinity required in these services, which mandates the reproduction of heterosexual masculinity. Interestingly, the findings also unveiled the complex dynamics of studying a group of men who relish the thought of being respectable. It is notable that my embodied experiences deliberately and politically make up part of the data, in that they show how the female body can become rendered as a sexual object within the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1977b). It is not my intent to further reproduce the discourse that women are constant victims of gendered organizational cultures nor does my analysis aim to reproduce the discourse that women are passive and inactive social agents (Connell, 1995; Smith, 2005). Instead, these reflexive accounts aim to add further insight into the ways in which women are resisted in male-dominated workplaces through the same heightened visibility that also makes men complicit in the reproduction of male dominance. While my gender was certainly limitative in relation to gaining access, it also proved to be generative in the sense that my token status allowed me to go—at times—unchallenged.

I often found myself to be an unwilling complicit participant in many of the jokes and interactions that occurred across the four stations. Juggling the imperatives of respecting the workplace cultures and simultaneously wanting to avoid being made complicit in these problematic workplace cultures proved to be an uncomfortable and troubling position to which I was unprepared (see Acker, 1990; Billing, 2011; Mulvey, 1989; Young, 2005). The self-proclaimed “tameness” of the men’s interactions in my company also shows an acceptance of these workplace cultures but also a level of pride in the more exaggerated everyday experiences of heterosexual masculinity. It is also notable that I was prevented from visiting certain stations due to the hostility that the fire service believed I may experience as a consequence, yet despite the policing of these workplace cultures, I still experienced slithers of hostility, even at the fire services’ more respectable stations.

The data detailed in this article have two main objectives. The first objective is to increase our collective methodological awareness about the challenges faced by female researchers exploring male-dominated workplaces. Short-term ethnographic methodologies have been shown in this article to be appropriate and effective tools in combating both subtle and overt experiences of research hostility. I argue that female researchers can utilize their experiences of research hostility to uncover patterns of behavior within the male-dominated settings. Unveiling the tolerance of workers toward these instances of heterosexual masculinity and detailing the immaturity of complicity in this context has broader ramifications for women who are similarly positioned as outsiders in these contexts.

Authors’ Note

All authors have agreed to the submission and the article is not currently being considered for publication by any other journal.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The Australian Government Research Training Scholarship funded this research.

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