

Inscribing Context 2013: Reflections on an Annual Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference at Concordia University

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Each year, the graduate students association in the Department of Sociology & Anthropology at Concordia University in Montreal hosts an interdisciplinary graduate student conference. The title for 2013 was “Inscribing Context: Fact, Fiction, and the Politics of Social Inquiry.” The event organizers chose the somewhat desultory title in order to reflect the interdisciplinary nature of the conference; all graduate students in social science programmes across Canada were welcome to submit proposals in French or English. The aim of the conference was twofold. First, it was meant to showcase the work of graduate students, especially those in the Sociology & Anthropology department at Concordia. First-year Master’s students in the department are required to participate as either presenters or volunteers in partial fulfilment of the requirements of their Professional Development seminar. Certain undergraduate students in the department were also selected to participate in the same capacities. Second, the event was meant to offer students (often preliminary) exposure to the academic conference atmosphere while also providing them with the opportunity to add scholarly development to their repertoires. Over two days, a total of thirty-five students—mostly from the Montreal area—sat on thirteen panels of two or three presenters facilitated by student or faculty moderators. Discussion periods followed the panel sessions, which were arranged by subject area, although most presenters worked in thoroughly unique domains. Sessions were organized around subjects such as technology, identity, activism, gender, deviance, sport and leisure, medicine, parenting, fandom, and the recent Quebec student strike. The conference came to a close with a keynote address from Concordia’s own Dr. Daniel Dagenais titled *Undoing Butler*, in which he challenged Judith Butler’s reliance upon a subscription to the existence of gender. The following is a canvassing of five predominant themes and panel sessions that elicited vivid discussion from both presenters and audience members. They include masculinity, parenting, technology, and a moderated discussion on student strikes.

Men and masculinities was arguably the most common overarching theme among several presentations as it was addressed as part of three different panels in terms of serial killers, sport and leisure, and advertising, among others. Several students in the department have chosen to attend Concordia to work within the realm of masculinity studies as faculty members such as Dr. Marc Lafrance and Dr. Anthony Synnott have contributed to a recent accretion of interest in the subject (Nebenzahl 2012; Lafrance 2012; Synnott 2009). Meriem Rebbani-Gosselin inaugurated the topic at the conference in her presentation on American serial killer Ted Bundy. Using mainly the anthropological work of Carole Pateman (1988) and Elliott Leyton (1995), Rebbani-Gosselin

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examined representations and embodiments of serial killers in North America, arguing that serial killings are gendered, symbolic, and cultural. The discussion following the presentation revealed that the phenomenon is especially enmeshed in notions of hegemonic masculinity as a disproportionate number of serial killers are males who are understood to forge hypermasculine identities through perceived societal power and ownership of women. Next, Casey Scheibling presented his analysis of advertisements aimed at material objects that supposedly provide male consumers with masculine characteristics. Scheibling drew on secondary research to demonstrate that beauty and body modification products that were traditionally marketed to women are now being directed towards men, eliciting a disconnect in gender stereotypes typically conveyed by the mass media. His research went beyond beauty products, demonstrating that most contemporary advertisements aimed at men perpetuate traditional forms of masculinity. Among Scheibling's examples, a particular Greek advertisement for second-hand BMW automobiles generated a lively reaction from the audience. It featured only a provocative headshot of a seemingly topless young woman and aside from the BMW Premium Selection Used Cars badge, simply read "You know you're not the first," implying to men that, much as is the case with women, it does not matter if a car has already been used (Learned 2008). Taken together, the work of Gosselin-Rebbani and Scheibling contributes to the broader intellectual conversation regarding representations of men and masculinity in North America, which are currently understood to be both increasingly diverse and traditional at the same time.

An entire panel was dedicated to sport, leisure, and masculinities, featuring my own work and that of Jessica Légère and Tesfa Peterson. Each of us interrogated gendered understandings of sport and leisure as well as the ways in which they affect the identities, behaviours, and roles of the individuals and groups involved. My presentation outlined a project that considers the Gongshow Hockey lifestyle alongside the findings of a two-year study that I conducted to address the relationship between masculinity and ice hockey among sixteen to twenty-year-old males at the Major Junior level in Canada. Gongshow Gear, Inc., the world's leading hockey apparel company, markets its products in correspondence with a particular lifestyle that encourages alcohol consumption and womanizing. This image, taken together with the findings of my study, which suggest that very few hockey players truly embody this image, leads to a third aspect of recent discussion in both academia and the mainstream media surrounding men's ice hockey—homophobia. I argued that professional male athletes are beginning to stand against homophobia (Shoalts 2013), indicating a shift away from traditional masculine attitudes that are encouraged by companies such as Gongshow Gear Inc. Next, Légère's presentation also outlined perceived changes in gendered identity formation and performance in a sports context. With the work on masculinity of sociologists such as R.W Connell (2005) and Eric Anderson (2009) in mind, she conducted a mainly quantitative study of identity-related perceptions of self and other among university-level athletes. Her results suggested that an identity-related shift is occurring in the culture of university sport as the distinction between masculine and feminine appearances, behaviours, and feelings have become increasingly difficult to establish. Lastly, Peterson rounded out the panel by offering an overview of her ethnography of Caribbean men in Montreal who met to engage in a weekly game of dominoes. Peterson was particularly interested in how the men negotiated issues of identity, space, and belonging. She concluded that the men quite consciously define themselves, use non-traditional leisure spaces, and facilitate a support network for one another through their participation in dominoes. She argued that these practices constituted evidence of agency, strategy, and the persistence of cultural practices in the diaspora. Our work can be understood as a timely extension of feminist and postmodernist studies of masculinity and sport that have been

in development since the early 1980s. A collegial and active discussion followed the panel, delving into matters such as the ideological work of advertising campaigns, pragmatic approaches to anti-homophobia activism in sport, mixed gender sports teams, the perceived crisis of masculinity, a code of silence among male athletes, and male and female roles in male-only and female-only spaces.

“The Politics of Parenting” panel proved to be a favored topic of discussion in part because one of the speakers, Jen Couture, held her infant daughter throughout her presentation, which prevailed as a schism from typical deliveries of academic papers. Couture addressed critical race theory and corporate influence as a paradigm within William Sears’ notion of attachment parenting (Sears & Sears 2001). She argued that Sears’ challenge to conventional Western child-rearing practices and integration of other cultural practices into his paradigm of attachment parenting embodied a representation of systemic racism. The two remaining panel members approached parenting quite differently. Katrina Fast discussed the controversial topic of gestational surrogacy and practices of commercial surrogacy in Israel, the United States, and India. Using a Foucauldian framework, she analyzed the surveillance and management of surrogate bodies through a range of institutions such as legislative entities, courts of law, medical clinics, reproductive agencies and state committees. Finally, in his presentation on single-parent families in Quebec, Chuk Plante noted the discrepancy between poverty rates experienced by lone-parent families in Quebec and the rest of Canada, which were comparable to statistics in Sweden and France. Quebec is a unique case, however, in the sense that the time required for families to recover after having entered poverty is identical to those in other Canadian provinces. Plante asserted that the phenomena merited longitudinal perspective in order to develop a better understanding of the impact of poverty on Quebec families over the life course. As a collective, all three presenters sought to add to humanistic conceptions of modern parenting by challenging western ideals of the process. The exchange following the panel session was largely centered on the role of women in parenting. Fast’s presentation, in particular, elicited lengthy discussion regarding definitions of kinship, religious beliefs, and adoption processes.

Two conference presentations made distinctive and compelling use of technology as an object of social enquiry, although they were categorized on separate panels. First, Dylan Dammermann examined the social and technological politics associated with knitting in the digital age. She addressed the role of the internet centered on the axis of technology and knitting groups. Her participant observation in a weekly knitting group was prompted by a noticeable increase in the amount of online craft resources, including opportunities for online and offline interaction. Her results indicated that websites such as *ravelry.com* affect knitting collectives by facilitating cross-generational and group socialization, varying levels of member competition, the sharing of knitting patterns and techniques, and ultimately, providing younger generations with the opportunity to adopt traditional skills. The discussion elicited by Dammermann’s presentation concerned several relevant topics such as the gendered division of crafters, the kinds of tutorials and instructions offered by websites such as *ravelry.com* and how it differs from other resources, knitting superstition, and the ways in which competition is manifested both on the website and in knitting groups. The second presentation on technology was given by Sara Breitreutz, who proposed that video games be investigated as a medium for ethnographic representation and interaction in consideration of the epistemological limitations of the written word and the authoritative position it occupies in anthropology. Drawing from game studies (Wolf 2002), anthropological work (Eriksen 2006; Clifford 1986), and personal experience, Breitreutz maintained that video games are capable of engaging players in a form of interactive, participatory narrative that lends itself to some goals of ethnography by virtue of the lived experience

of telling stories based on experience, immersing oneself into other worldviews and ways of life, and educating a deeper understanding of self and other. Breitzkreutz shared examples of independent games such as *Dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012) to illustrate her points. She concluded by emphasizing the potential usefulness of video games as ethnographies in terms of accessibility, relevance, and the role of academics as public intellectuals. During the discussion period that ensued, Breitzkreutz added that video games had a marked presence at the most recent Margaret Mead Film Festival. She also elaborated further on issues in anthropology regarding public intellectuals and the potential for video games to function as sites for the production, negotiation, and mediation of narrative and meaning. Despite their differing approaches, both Dammermann and Breitzkreutz contributed to their chosen scholarship field by navigating qualitative methodological boundaries in the digital age, demonstrating the usefulness of examining the nexus between virtual and in-person interactions.

One submission for a paper on student strikes in light of the recent situation in Quebec inspired a moderated discussion on student movements. Yann Pineault presented his scholarly work on the matter and Concordia student Gabrielle Bouchard, who works at the 2110 Center for Gender Advocacy at Concordia and who was highly involved in the student strike, was invited to participate in the session and generate relevant dialogue in light of Pineault's presentation. In consideration of the work of Michel Foucault (2003;1971), Pineault explained that a context of struggle was produced first by economic concerns surrounding tuition fees, but secondly, and perhaps more importantly, by questions regarding the purpose of academia. In fact, these questions date back to the time of enlightenment thinkers who originally designed the modern university. Two epistemological trends were evident—a rationalist one and one influenced by Foucault which sought to enhance critical thought and relativism. Pineault asserted that each tradition tended to tie in with particular disciplines and that the recent student mobilization was no different, noting that the social sciences and humanities were more likely to have an affinity to Foucauldian thought. Such epistemological divisions seemed to influence the positions that students took during the strike, which left Pineault perplexed as he saw very little objectivity towards the matter and even less so in terms of an academic approach to the crisis. Following his presentation, he acknowledged the difficulties associated with formulating an objective approach. In any event, the role of discourse proved to be a key theme in the discussion following the presentation. One audience member suggested that an examination of discourse construction during the strike could have been an opportunity for rich ethnographic fieldwork that may have uncovered students' positions in a politically and historically unstable context. Bouchard added that discourse and opinion construction differed greatly among students at the time. Furthermore, despite any analytical reasoning regarding the purpose of education, tuition was going to increase and many students felt that the issue needed to be dealt with immediately, leaving little room for concrete and well-timed critical thought. The remainder of the discussion was related to Pineault's ideas regarding the possibility of a neutral position.

Overall, the conference was successful in fulfilling its objective to provide graduate students with a collegial atmosphere in which to gain academic conference experience. The broad range of topics addressed and gainful conversation during both panel discussions and rest periods all contributed to the advancement of student research activities and scholarly development. A complete collection of the abstracts can be found on the graduate student association's website. The strong presence of masculinity studies among participants from Concordia may indicate the path that the university is taking towards research on both men and women. An article was published in the Montreal Gazette in 2012 regarding the increasing popularity of men and masculinity studies at the

institution's downtown campus (Nebenzahl 2012). With regards to the future of the conference, organizers have already begun to formulate ideas for next year and have indicated that their goal is to increase national awareness of the conference. They hope to attract more students from outside of Quebec in an effort to facilitate networking opportunities and potentially illustrate a more robust image of graduate student research interests in Canada.

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