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# The Babysitter as Family Member or Employee?: A Unique Case of Altercasting

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## Introduction

The role played by the babysitter is unique in that it involves intimacy and parenting, but in the context of employment. While some families expect that the babysitter maintain a professional and rather distanced role from the family, others begin to act toward the babysitter as a family member. Altercasting, first described by Eugene Weinstein and Paul Deutschberger in 1963, is the projection of an identity onto an individual that is congruent with one's own goals. The altercater is often in a position of power over the altercastee, whether it be through structural authority, manipulation or emotional control. While conducting field research as a babysitter, I observed that both the parents and children use these techniques to place the babysitter into a position that identifies them either as an employee or family member. The babysitter is then forced to manage these various identities placed upon her. This research seeks to understand the different ways that parents define the babysitter's identity and how the babysitter manages the shifts in their relationship.

## Methods

- I conducted my observations through autoethnographic field research. I have been a babysitter for the past 8 years, which made gaining entrée to the field fairly easy. I was able to observe my own interactions with the children and parents, the demands made on me and my responses. After each babysitting session I would write detailed field notes about the time spent with the family. I coded field notes to identify emergent themes.
- I did not inform any of the parents that their interactions and their child's interactions were being used for my study. I felt that they did not need to give consent because my main focus is the way the babysitter manages the identities placed on her. This was not a case study of families, therefore the actual role of the parents and children is minimal. However, I used great caution to ensure anonymity and confidentiality with all the families observed. I changed all identifying information about the families, such as names, cities, careers, and local business.
- The experiences of other babysitters and their interactions with families provided additional data. In interviewing the babysitters I maintained anonymity and confidentiality in respect to the identity of both the babysitters and families they told me about in their interviews.

## Findings

During my field research I observed repeating themes in the babysitters relationship with parents and their children. Parents and children tend to employ altercasting, which in this case, is shifting the subject position of the babysitter between employee and family member to convenience the family. The babysitter manages these identities in a variety of ways.

### *Role of the babysitter: Family Member*

- Parents altercast the babysitter into positions closer to family when it benefits them. Placing the babysitter in an aunt-like role makes her more likely to accept a lower hourly rate and agree to undesirable work hours.
- Children tend to altercast the babysitter into the role of a mother, sister or aunt in times of vulnerability. When the child is falling asleep, being dropped off at school or hurt, they will refer to the as a more intimate role than their job tends to label them.

### *Role of the babysitter: Employee*

- The parents will consider the babysitter an employee when they want them to take on extra jobs than just watch the children, such as, clean the house, do the laundry or run errands.
- The children will altercast the babysitter into a position of an employee when they are angry at the babysitter as an act of rebellion and want to reinforce that the babysitter is not their parent.



### *Managing identities: Acceptance*

- When the babysitter is being treated like family or a close friend in a way that benefits her or makes the babysitter feel loved, it is easy to embrace this role.
- While the babysitter knows she is not technically family being loved like a family member is a rewarding aspect to the job.
- Often, the babysitter will forgo making payment a priority in order to maintain her position as babysitter.

### *Managing identities: Control*

- If the altercasting becomes stressful and overwhelming to the babysitter she will use different tactics to manage the various roles.
- One way she does this is by reminding herself that this is a temporary job.
- The babysitter must be able to keep her own position as employee, she must maintain emotional distance.

### *Managing identities: Termination*

- The final way of managing unwanted altercasting is by completely terminating work with a family.
- Most babysitters that I have spoken to have had to end a babysitting job due to a breach in the expected roles of the babysitter.

## Discussion

- Research on altercasting and impression management by Richard B. Felson focuses on the way that individuals handle insults from others. He explains in his observations that people will accept or reject the identity projected on them by the altercater often based on the presence of an audience.
- In my observations while babysitting, I noticed that the presence of an audience had an impact on both the altercater and the altercastee.
- The babysitter would more often reject the title of mom or sister if the actual family member holding that title was watching the interaction.
- Both the parents and children felt more motivated to altercast the babysitter into a familial position when their was an audience they were seeking to impress. Such as, a mother would invite the babysitter to her child's birthday party to show off to her friends how close she is with the babysitter.
- Children generally prefer the babysitter to take on the position of mother when there is an unfamiliar audience, such as at the park with strangers around.

## Conclusions

- The babysitter is placed in a unique position where the expected amount of emotions allowed at her job are not clearly defined.
- This gives her superiors the ability to manipulate the babysitter's identity into a position that is most beneficial for the family for which she is babysitting.
- The babysitter often enjoys being considered family, but must make compromises in job in order to accommodate the family more.
- The babysitter uses different techniques to manage the identities and maintain control.

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