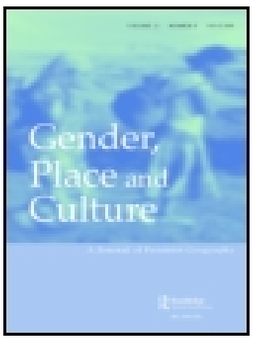

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'Stuffed If I Know!': reflections on post-modern feminist social research

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ABSTRACT *This paper tells the tale of a social research project which has been situated within and shaped by the flux of current feminist debates. In particular it addresses the challenges posed by post-modern theory to feminist social research which hinge on the status of women as an identity. If we are to accept that there is no unity, centre or actuality to discover for women, what is feminist research about? What might be the effects of researching women in mining towns as though such a group were a natural, self-evident and coherent category? In this paper I explore the politics of situating a research project on women with respect to the discursive terrain already mapped out. I rethink action research methods in the light of post-modern politics and research practice, and I argue that social research can play a role in discursive destabilisation and in the creation and promotion of alternative discourses of gendered subjects.*

Introduction

'Stuffed if I know!' [1] is the phrase that resounds in my head as I reflect on doing feminist research in the 1990s. It was the frequent reply made by Leanne, a woman participating in the research project I want to discuss here, to any questions asked directly about her life, community and political involvements in a mining town in central Queensland. Of course she did know, and she knew a lot, although what she knew was not what she initially thought I wanted to know. Her predictable answer became a group joke as the research participants and I began to feel comfortable enough to allow self-deprecating humour. The amusing thing was that after this initial denial of knowledge, Leanne characteristically became one of the most expansive discussants in the group.

Why does this phrase continue to resonate? Partly because as it was said by Leanne it problematised knowledge. It questioned what one woman knew and did not know; what I wanted to know and why it might be she who knew it; and what of her knowing would be considered knowledge for my project. Partly, also, because as Leanne said it, it struck a chord within myself. When I get asked 'What do you know?' I experience a

similar reaction and a resistance to the implicit assumption that I am a centred and knowing subject who is present to myself and can be spoken for. Hence my attraction to contemporary developments in post-structuralist theory that challenge the concepts of self and knowledge implicit in the Cartesian understanding of subjectivity (Young, 1990, p. 310). Partly, as well, because 'stuffed if I know' reflects my initial reaction to questions about feminist methodology in the light of post-modern critiques of modernist epistemology and science [2].

As debates within feminism rage over the scientific and political status of women's knowledge, at times I have felt at a loss to know why I was researching mining town women at all and whether what I was doing was in any way feminist research. And yet, like Leanne, I do know something and I could try to communicate my own emerging ideas about doing anti-essentialist post-modern feminist social research and negotiating the difficult questions of subjectivity and identity.

Until quite recently feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint theory have offered epistemological positions that have been the basis for a phenomenal growth in feminist social science (Harding, 1986). Empirical studies conducted from a range of theoretical perspectives (radical, socialist and liberal feminist) have all in some way affirmed the existence of women's experience as a source of privileged understandings, if not the basis of an alternative social science. Now, however, the deconstruction of 'women' is having profoundly destabilising effects upon feminist theorising and research (Barrett, 1991) [3].

Wendy Brown (1991) writes of the "palpable feminist panic" that has arisen as the situated and subjective knowledge of 'women', gleaned, for example, from ethnography, oral history material or consciousness raising groups, has come under attack for its presumption of representing the 'hidden truth' of women or women's experience [4]. With the turn to post-modernism many of the certainties of a feminist research practice have been dislodged. This has liberated a plethora of exciting philosophical, political and cultural endeavours that tackle the essentialism around women embedded in both feminist and non-feminist texts [5]. At the same time, however, feminist social analysts find themselves confronting an ironic impasse as what have been seen as the unifying objects of our research dissolve before our eyes.

This paper tells the tale of a social research process which has been situated within and shaped by the flux of current feminist debates. It takes up some of the problems of 'doing gender' outlined by other feminist geographers such as McDowell (1992), Dyck (1993), Rose (1993) and Pratt (1993). Like them, I take seriously the challenges posed by post-modern theory to feminist social scientific research. If we are to accept that there is no unity, centre or actuality to discover for women, what is feminist research about? How can we speak of our experiences as women? Can we still use women's experiences as resources for social analysis? Is it still possible to do research *for* women? How can we negotiate the multiple and decentred identities of women? In this paper I try to reflect self-consciously upon these questions as I discuss the research direction taken and the methods employed in my own project [6].

Mining and Representation

In many ways *mining* and social research are parallel activities. Both intervene in and disturb a landscape by probing and digging for a rich lode of ore or layer of stratum that has hitherto lain covered, or unknown, perhaps until now unvalued. Like bauxite, women's knowledge has lain potentially accessible, part of the surficial landscape, for centuries untouched by the technical interventions of dynamite and front-end loader,

tape-recorder and questionnaire, simply because society has had no use for it. Today, bauxite is mined by aluminium can makers and women's knowledge is mined by feminist researchers. This paper is about how and why we might go about 'mining' women's knowledge in a post-modern vein.

During 1987 and 1990 when I was researching the development of new mining localities in central Queensland, I consciously tried to document stories about the activities of women along with those told by company managers, union representatives and community workers. My attempt to include the narratives of 'ordinary' women in mining towns marked my phase of what Stanley & Wise have called "corrective feminist research" (1983, p. 25). I was concerned to 'add women in', to redress the imbalance I saw in the (very much) his-stories of mine and mining town development since the 1960s in the frontierland of Australia's 'deep north'.

The research methods I employed resembled the blast and shovel techniques of open cut mining. Into my front-end loader I blithely proceeded to shovel conversations and interviews with women around the issue of public involvements in political, industrial and community issues. At this time I was not concerned to problematise the discursive strategy of using 'miners' wives' or 'mining town women' as categories for exploration. These fictions occupied a secure place within modern social science discourse and presented themselves to me as 'natural' or obvious social designations.

Two 'identities' or 'constructions' were available in relation to the women I was concerned with. One was the representation purveyed by mainstream Australian social analysts and service providers influenced by the liberal community studies tradition. In this discourse 'mining town women' are a client group who have needs for better social, psychological and health services. They are portrayed as independent and self-reliant, but defensive, vulnerable, cautious of emotional commitment, lonely, isolated, stressed and traditional. This literature is haunted by the spectre of 'country women', the truly centred, community-minded and integrated rural women to whom mining town women are the lesser, the Other. In that their social networks are more unstable and their commitments to community-based activities more unreliable than those of country women [7], mining town women are constructed as psychologically deformed.

The other representation was that purveyed by socialist and socialist-feminist analysts in Australia, the UK and North America. In this international discourse 'miners' wives' are situated as auxiliary members of the industrial proletariat, the feminine face of the politically cohesive working class mining community that holds such a hallowed place in left wing sociology. While researchers studying the newer mining communities of Australia and North America have emphasised the differences between women in these more affluent and isolated new towns and those in traditional mining communities of the British, Welsh and Appalachian coalfields (see for example, Williams, 1981; Kingsolver, 1989; Gibson, 1991a), miners' wives are still constituted within a discourse that brings to the foreground the functional overlap of capitalist exploitation and patriarchal oppression. Working class first and women second, miners' wives are subsumed to the fictional identity 'working class' and relegated to the status of Other within this totalising conception [8].

The focus in the socialist-feminist literature upon industrial disputes, in which women are expected to express their real identities through solidarity with working-class men, situates this literature solidly within essentialist Marxism-feminism where consciousness is true or false and subjectivity structurally constructed and constrained. Most of the studies within this tradition highlight those occasions when miners' wives invert their Other status, come to recognise their true class alignment, and heroically join, lead, or hold their men to authentic working-class consciousness and action.

As I collected stories of women's political involvements in mining towns, these two discourses formed a contradictory backdrop of concern. Corrective research, it seemed, could not add women into the picture without situating them with respect to one or the other representation. But the available characterisations seemed to construct narrow, unidimensional identities and subject positions with negative and disciplinary overtones. Both the client/victim/pathologised individual representation of liberal discourse and the proletarian/militant/supporter-cum-leader representation of socialist discourse denied the potential for a multiplicity of political subjectivities to emerge. And both seemed actively to organise women out of any independent involvement in either industrial or gender politics.

As I began to write up stories of women in mining towns, it occurred to me that a discourse, somewhat like a mineral, is a substance that is socially constructed and valued on account of the uses to which it can be put. In the process of mining women's knowledge the researcher looks for 'evidence' that can fit a discourse she or he is engaged in influencing or constructing. These traces might be stories told by interviewees, they might be personal impressions or responses to formal questions. And like the miner, the researcher cannot just uncover and extract new mineral mass; she or he must also ensure that the product can be sold in the intellectual market-place.

I was wary of the ways in which the stories I collected could be incorporated into the liberal and socialist feminist discourses and I worried about the effects of reinforcing existing representations. A few examples might illustrate my dilemma.

Exploratory Probes and Precious Glimmers

My interest in the political voices of women in mining communities led me to problematise the unpredictable, public political activities of miners' wives and to collect stories about the most obvious examples of women's political activism, the Miners' Women's Auxiliaries in each town [9]. These organisations, once commonly found in older underground mining communities, have traditionally been adjuncts to the men's union, run basically as welfare organisations by wives of miners. Auxiliaries usually come into being at the time of a major dispute or disaster when mining town women become community carers, dispensing food, shelter and comfort. What follows are some of the stories of past and present Miners' Women's Auxiliaries and other organisations I came across in three towns.

Collinsville

Miners' wives in their sixties and seventies remembered the Collinsville and Scottville Miners' Women's Auxiliaries as active organisations that met in the 1950s on a regular basis. These neighbouring communities had originally been formed around underground mines in the 1920s. In both, the Communist Party of Australia was strong and the Women's Auxiliaries took on a broad range of issues:

> We used to meet once a month and it was a whole social morning. We had morning tea. We had proper meetings, properly run. We discussed what was going on around the town, we discussed politics, we wrote letters of protest here, there and everywhere. ... We lived in a little valley. but we kept up with what was going on. (Collinsville woman, 1990)

> We started off as the Miners' Women's Auxiliary and then joined the Housewives Association which then became the Union of Australian Women. Then the mine closed down and we disbanded. (Collinsville woman, 1990)

> We set up our own greengrocer's supply. It started at a (Women's Auxiliary) meeting when people were complaining about not getting enough fruit and vegies because the prices were outrageous ... We ordered supplies from the Brisbane market. We paid market prices and fruit and vegies came by train. We charged market prices plus freight and we took turns going and doing up the orders. It kept going for years. (Collinsville woman, 1990)

In addition to organising around welfare and consumption issues, Collinsville and Scottville women actively supported their men in work place-based struggles such as the 1952 stay-down strike about wages and conditions at the Collinsville State Mine and the closure of the state mine in 1961.

From their long perspective the older women in Collinsville and Scottville see the contemporary period of mining activity as very different. There is no Women's Auxiliary operating in this community now. As they see it, the welfare role of the Women's Auxiliary is unnecessary today [10].

> There's no struggle any more. They're [we're?] a dying race. (Elderly Collinsville woman, 1990)

In this comment I heard many things. I heard the lament for a modernist socialist politics that had so readily created a community of exclusion centred on the privileged and conscious few who could lead the way toward revolution. I heard the disgruntlement of old timers unhappy with the way things are now. I heard judgements of younger women, their politics bought off by material comforts. I heard sentiments that could have been read as marking the absence of socialist or feminist politics in today's style of working-class community.

I wondered, were the new breed of Collinsville and Scottville women a less hardy race, whose political concerns had been swapped for microwave and video-recorder? Was the liberal 'mining town woman' discourse more appropriate to an understanding of Collinsville's new generation of miners' wives? Why had these radical older women not raised another generation of stirrers? There were no public manifestations of any organisation, but did this preclude activism? How might the socialist visions of struggle, to which these older women adhered, have actually precluded different styles of politics, particularly ones that were women-focused rather than class-focused? As the older women spoke of a past age of courage and solidarity with their men, I began to see the discipline their vision of unity could enforce and how it might have contributed to the political silencing of younger women.

Moura

Moura is a town based on the modern, globally-oriented coal industry, a site of underground mines and the first open cut mine developed explicitly for coal export in 1960. In 1990, Moura was the only town in central Queensland that still had an operating Women's Auxiliary. It had 16 paid up members (mostly in their forties or older) who met once a month in the local park. Perhaps this organisation was still in existence in Moura because the community had suffered two very bad underground

mine disasters in recent times. In each case the Women's Auxiliary played a major role in servicing the rescue teams and supporting the families of the dead miners.

As an ongoing organisation the Moura Women's Auxiliary defines itself in rather narrow terms. Its primary role is to distribute the 'men's money' to the needy—the families of sick or injured miners or those on strike. It is not allowed by its constitution to be a fund-raising organisation, though it can and does raise money on behalf of other charities in the town. Up to now it has not acted as a forum for discussion of specifically feminist or industrial politics.

Indeed, the juxtaposition in Moura of an operating Women's Auxiliary and a spontaneous grassroots political organisation, the Concerned Women of Moura, is one of the more curious discoveries of my research. The Concerned Women of Moura came together to lobby state parliamentarians about new industrial legislation that the right wing Queensland state premier was intending to introduce in 1987. This legislation proposed to empower the state government to declare strikers law breakers and to seize their personal assets if employment contracts were opposed. In the lead-up to the 1987 federal election both the conservative National and Liberal parties in Queensland endorsed the proposed changes.

While in most of the mining communities organised labour mounted campaigns to oppose the introduction of this repressive legislation, in Moura the struggle came to be seen as a community issue, mainly through the activities of this spontaneous organisation of women. Like many women in Queensland mining towns, the two women who spearheaded the Concerned Women of Moura had not been Labor Party [11] voters prior to this moment. For these women, and the five friends who joined them in the initial organisation of the group, it was a big step to consider changing their vote in an election to Labor, let alone to take direct political action as they did.

The struggle was seen by the Moura women as pitting their community against the state, and while unions were obviously involved, the women did not rely upon union structures to include their voices. Their grassroots organisation was successful in influencing the federal election vote and the proposed changes to industrial legislation were dropped shortly before the state government crumbled under allegations of corruption. After the election the Concerned Women of Moura disbanded. When I again visited Moura in 1990 the memory of this fight was already beginning to fade and the experience had not entered the collective knowledge of mining town women outside the town.

I found it heartening that Moura women challenged the opposition posed between 'mining town women' and 'country women' but I was also provoked to think of the relationship between their activities and feminist politics. Although both organisations gave their participants a sense of greater individual and collective power, it was not power *with* respect to, or over, men but power channelled *for* men in some way. In this sense, both stayed within the socialist, feminist discourse of miners' wives.

Within this discourse there was, however, an interesting glimmer of difference. The Women's Auxiliary was based upon a sense of continued, shared and internal identity gained by its members' relationship to mineworkers. It appealed to an older group of women but faced the constant problem of maintaining membership and negotiating the constraints placed upon it by its fixed and limited identity. The Concerned Women of Moura was also an organisation grounded in women's identities as miners' wives but it was ephemeral and came into being as a result of many different women's relation to an external threat. The subjectivity it created was based upon momentary and partial

identification; it allowed a fluid set of practices to be directed towards a political goal, and then dissolved [12].

Moranbah

In the stories above women's organisations gained some form of legitimation by supporting men's struggles. In a sense, all these organisations were designed to challenge the power of capital as expressed in the actions of coal companies, the state and local merchants. In Moranbah, I encountered women organising around so called women's (or non-economic) issues and it was interesting to hear of the considerable barriers to their efforts that had been constructed by men. The Moranbah stories could not easily be fitted into either the liberal or socialist discourses.

A group of miners' wives who had been active in the formation of a (rather temporary) Miners' Women's Auxiliary during the 6 week housing strike in 1978 (see Gibson, 1991a and b) saw the desperate need in the community for women to get some respite from the full-time care of their pre-school age children and to obtain information and support in child rearing. They also felt that there was a need for the town to initiate community development projects that were not directed and instigated by either the mine management or union organisations. The women began to lobby the state government, local union branches and the mining company to set up a neighbourhood centre, with a community social worker, to act as a focus for community development, as well as a child care centre offering occasional care for babies and pre-school children.

The unions were reluctant to support the building of a child care centre, and the miners themselves could not see the need for child care as that was what their wives were supposed to do. When women from the organising committee were allowed to address the rank and file union members at the mine site, the meeting was set up in the men's shower block, a venue the women speakers felt was deliberately selected to intimidate and embarrass them. The Combined Mining Unions refused support for the child care centre but agreed to contribute to the salary of the social worker associated with the neighbourhood centre.

A new building was finally built to house the day care centre and the neighbourhood centre. In the minds of some, the combination of both functions into one building was a mistake. The whole complex has tended to be seen as a child care centre and as a place for women and children, and the neighbourhood centre has had difficulty reaching out to the wider community. With the appointment of a number of young social workers whose radical feminist style and projects offended the values of many male and female community leaders, the centre has become feared, particularly by men.

> That's a place to keep your wife away from if you don't want her to divorce you. (Moranbah miner, 1990)

This project illustrates the problems for a feminist politics in mining communities where 'legitimate' politics means union politics and 'legitimate' women's politics means supporting the men.

One of the projects initiated by a (radical feminist) community worker at the Moranbah Neighbourhood Centre was the production of a video by a group of local women. Some eight women conceived of the topic, wrote and researched the script, conducted interviews and filmed the video with technical assistance from James Cook University, located at Townsville on the coast. The title selected for the video was 'Moranbah—is it so different?' In it the group challenged what they saw to be prevalent,

negative representations of modern-day mining communities as towns with transient populations and a higher than average incidence of social problems like strikes, alcoholism, divorce, family break-up, domestic violence and child abuse. The video faces these images head on, arguing that there is no evidence to show that these problems are worse than in any other part of Australia. It counters the negative representations with positive images of the town, its sporting facilities, young population and affluence.

What I found interesting about the video was its silences about aspects of the social identity of mining communities that most social scientists highlight, such as class divisions, corporate control and militant unionism. Though women individually would admit that these are important features of Moranbah, the composition of the video production group prevented discussion of these issues. The project involved eight women, three of whom were wives of salaried staffmen (identified with management) at the mine, the rest being wives of wage workers. I began to see glimmers of how, as a *women's* group, participants experienced some of the contradictions of attaining a voice based upon a singular identity. The effort to represent the town positively culminated in a censoring of certain aspects of identity and a resultant code of silence around some of the most marked dimensions of difference.

Yet, while it bypassed any discussion of class power, the video project did allow the participants to confront and escape their traditional roles and confinement to the household. It did enable them to challenge their usual lack of participation in public image-making about their town. Both the Moranbah projects appeared to counter the socialist and liberal discourses on mining town women. They showed the capacity of women of different backgrounds to organise together, and to organise in the face of opposition from men. Here were forms of political activism and subjectivity that escaped the logic of the 'rural women' identity in which 'mining town women' are constructed as Other to 'country women', as well as the logic of working-class identity in which the 'miner's wife' is positioned as Other to the 'proletarian miner' (in both subject positions women in mining towns are constructed as the less potent, the subordinated and the underdeveloped). Here was a glimmer of actions by and for women which united and empowered and, at the same time, silenced and disciplined their participants [13].

Processing

The stories I collected undermined the representation of 'mining town women' as individualistic and depressed, unwilling to connect with other women or contribute to community activities. But the traditionalism of the gender relations in these stories reinforced mainstream representations of women as personally and politically dependent upon men. The stories also overlapped with the socialist-feminist discourse on 'miners wives' as members of the working-class, but at the same time allowed glimpses of other processes by which different (non-working class) subjectivities were continually being crafted, and sometimes enunciated in action (Kondo, 1990). A deconstruction of 'mining town women' and 'miners' wives' had allowed me to see both as regulatory fictions masquerading as self-evident categories of analysis, each of which positioned women in mining towns in subjugated positions.

I suspected that the traditional representation of 'mining town women' had a use within the discursive space occupied by social workers and service providers. The image of mining town women as individualistic non-joiners was a handy categorisation which justified the interventionist activities of service providers and staff wives (often the same

people in the smaller towns) who acted as gatekeepers for all social activity and any gender-based politics in the towns.

At the same time I was aware that the left representation of 'miner's wife' had a use within the discursive space occupied by union leaders, labour historians and socialist feminists. The image of a solid supporter of 'the men' and upholder of hard-won conditions valued and romanticised the contribution of women, and established the nobility of the miners' class struggle. For the wives of some miners this representation was a welcome reward for toeing the line in an important but self-effacing way. Women were accorded the accolades befitting true working-class warriors when they willingly subordinated their lives to the cause of jobs (for men), wages (for men), political rights (for men) or lower taxes (for men). But it seemed clear to me that these accolades would not be forthcoming if women overstepped some invisible mark and, for instance, interfered in wage negotiations or shift work changes when major disputes were not in the offing, or led a movement for paid work (for women) or wages for housework.

This initial process of deconstructing the categories 'mining town woman' and 'miner's wife' had allowed me to identify their politically powerful disciplinary and exclusionary effects. At the same time I had begun to see a glimpse of alternative subject positions and political identities for women in mining towns with which I could interact. It occurred to me that producing alternative discourses of gender and mining town life was one way of liberating alternative subjectivities for mining town women.

The question that soon emerged was why create an alternative discourse, an alternative voicing, and where was its audience? Who was interested in new subject positions for women in mining towns? And, anyway, why construct alternative subjectivities for mining town women if 'women' in general had disappeared? The usual answer to such questions harks back to the political project of feminism and the central role that research plays in the 'liberation' of women. But the political project of post-modern feminism is now a matter of considerable debate.

Research as Politics/Politics of Research

In dissolving the presumed unity of women's identity post-modern feminism has liberated knowledge and given rise to fruitful theoretical controversies as to who women 'are' and how to 'know' them. At the same time, however, Brown's "palpable feminist panic" (1991, mentioned at the outset of this paper) seems to have migrated from the realm of theory into the political realm, where the identity 'woman' has usually been constituted as the *necessary* ground of feminist political action [14]. Feminists have historically claimed that as 'women' we are dominated and oppressed, and feminist politics has staked its legitimacy upon the assumption of this shared or common, but importantly, *subordinated* identity. To surrender epistemological claims about women's shared identity has signified, for many, giving up the structural and moral position from which to organise politically to overcome oppression (Brown, 1991, p. 75). Without unity of women's identity, many critics see post-modern feminism as opening the doors to fragmentation, factionalism and political disempowerment [15]. It was in the face of this possibility that Spivak's strategic essentialism was proposed (in an interview with Grosz, 1984).

It seems that, for many, a paradox has emerged—as knowledge has been liberated, politics has been shackled. While feminists may agree that in theory, difference empowers, when it comes to politics many still hold to the adage that 'united we stand, divided we fall'. Ferguson (1993) argues that feminists must accept this contradiction and learn to live with the inevitable tension between articulating 'women's experience' (or in-

terpretation in her terms) and deconstructing the texts that represent and enforce this presumed commonality (or genealogy in her terms). Rather than insisting on a real, originative essence that defines all women, Ferguson advocates constant movement between the (strategically essentialised) representation of women's experience and the (strategically non-essentialised) deconstructivist practice of undermining fixed categories of identity and gender.

Interpretation and genealogy are "postures toward power and knowledge that need one another" (Ferguson, 1993, p. 29). In support of this view, Pratt (1993) calls for an "equal commitment" and "continuing dialogue" between these two moments of research practice. Barrett (1991) similarly positions the two moments in opposition:

> So it is an issue of whether one wants, speaking as a feminist, to deconstruct or to inhabit the category of 'women'. (p. 166)

Ferguson's suggestion for negotiating the problems produced by this contradictory strategy is to keep the discursive stance of irony always at hand. But I see a danger in posing these moments as opposing practices in irreducible/ironic tension, the one associated with grounded commitment, the other with relativism. Surely all deconstruction, or the tracing of "how we produce truths" (Spivak, 1989, p. 214), is done from a specific theoretical and political entry point from which further interpretation also proceeds. Seeing one posture as less political because it highlights difference, and the other as more political because it highlights collective identity seems to suggest that the politics of identity is the only viable political form (for feminists at least). It also implies residual loyalty to the modernist separation of theory and practice—that conception of knowledge/theory existing separate from and prior to change/politics (we understand the world *in order to* change it). Practice or politics, in this formulation, can only be enacted by a collectivity of subjects all identically positioned *vis à vis* the structure of power that has been rendered visible by theory. What this conception betrays is an interesting failure to see knowledge and its production as an *always already* political process.

What is needed, it seems, is a rethinking of the relationship between politics and research. Following Foucault, I would see post-modern feminist politics starting from the assumption that power is everywhere inscribed, in and by women, as well as by men, in theory as well as in practice, in difference as well as in unity. Thus the process of theoretical production is as much a political intervention in changing power relations as is self-consciously (identity-based) political organisation. There is no prior reality or unified identity to gain access to or to be created by research from which we can launch a programme of change. There are, however, existing discourses that position subjects in relations of empowerment and disempowerment. The ways in which theory and research interact with these discourses have concrete political effects.

In this project I was not only working with existing discourses that situated and identified mining town women, but attempting to create new discourses and subject positions. As a social researcher, I was interested in the circulation of alternative discourses on women in mining towns within communities of interest not readily touched by academic writing. One mode of circulation open to me was the research process itself. Encouraged by feminists such as Brown and Weedon to engage in conversation and public discourse [16], I wanted to move beyond a purely literary discursive intervention into representations of women in mining towns and into 'the field' [17]. I embarked upon a research process that attempted to involve women as 'knowing subjects' in the 'always already' political nature of the research process.

Immediately I was confronted by the practical dilemmas of how to include women in mining towns in the process of discursive deconstruction and the circulation of new discourses. One alternative was to attempt direct intervention in power relations between men and women by embarking on a project of action and participatory research. But in formal action research models the process of researching one's own situation with others who are similarly situated is designed to have the effect of raising consciousness of shared conditions and oppression. This method of research relies upon an identification between researcher and researched and the discovery of a shared subject position from which political intervention can be discussed and enacted (Reinharz, 1992). Without an assumed basis of unity between women could these research methods still be employed? In pursuing my idea of social research as a public engagement in the construction of alternative discourses, I was forced to rethink methods of action research in terms of post-modern feminist social research practice. The last section of this paper tells the story of the research roller coaster that took off.

As Luck Would Have It ...

As luck would have it, in 1989 an industrial issue had emerged which was disturbing many women in mining communities and I realised as I continued with my interviews that a market for an alternative discourse on women in mining towns existed right there amongst mining town women themselves. Both of the established identities and subject positions discussed in the literature were actively preventing women from addressing the issue of their concern. I could see the potential to create a space where another identity and subjectivity might begin to grow—women as researchers of their own conditions and potentially as industrial activists in a male-dominated industry.

In 1988 a new Industry Award had been instituted in the black coal industry of Queensland and New South Wales. An important element of this award was the introduction of new work rosters which would allow the mining production process to continue 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year, thereby maximising the utilisation of machinery and increasing mine productivity. New workers were not, by and large, employed to maintain this intensified production regime, but existing work practices were restructured to facilitate greater output from the established work-force.

In the coal mines of central Queensland most mines introduced what is known as the 7-day roster, a work timetable that involves shift work rotating on a 7-day basis with 1 or 2 days off between the seven afternoon and day shifts and a longer period of 4 days off after the night shift at the end of the rotation cycle. Whereas in the past most miners had had the voluntary option of working overtime at weekends (and many people worked one weekend day), after the new industry award overtime work was made compulsory and most workers were entitled to only one consecutive Saturday and Sunday off per month.

While there have been countless studies of the effects of shift work and different roster arrangements, most of these studies focus upon the disruption of circadian rhythms and other physiological and psychological effects on the well-being of the shift worker [18]. The male-worker bias of much of this research is evident in the preoccupation with evaluating impacts on the availability of leisure (and for protagonists of different roster systems the maximisation of leisure time). The fact that increased leisure for men (in terms of days off during the week) coincides with an unchanged (or even an increased) workload for their partners is rarely acknowledged [19].

In Queensland the change of work roster was having a number of impacts on workers, their families and communities that were causing concern, particularly among women. The new work roster was quickly dubbed the 'divorce roster' and in this naming the connection between work changes and home life was clearly established. From informal discussions with a wide range of people in central Queensland coal mining towns in 1990 it seemed there was a need for research that was explicitly designed to break with the individualistic approach of much research into shift work, placing the worker in his family and community context in order to gauge the wider impacts of industry restructuring. I therefore embarked on a research project with the very practical aim of documenting these impacts from the perspectives of women in mining towns.

The situation appeared to offer interesting potential to begin a number of conversations in different contexts, about women's role and input into industry policy, and about the possibility of feminist politics and research in the light of theoretical debates over post-modernism and difference.

Identity, Difference and Post-modern Feminist Action Research

As my own research and that of others had established, in mining towns women are marginalised by many processes (Sturmey, 1989; Gibson, 1992a). The male dominance of the mining work-force and lack of alternative employment for women contributes to the impoverishment of women and their utter economic dependence upon men. It was clear from the stories I had collected previously that the traditions of mining unionism excluded women from anything but the most peripheral involvement in industrial politics, and the prominence of traditional images of masculine and feminine identity (Connell, 1987) constrained even the most mundane efforts towards women's social independence.

I decided to employ a number of miners' wives as co-researchers in the project in an attempt to confront some aspects of women's marginalisation [20]. The women employed had to be experiencing life with a shift worker on a 7-day roster. They also were selected on the basis of their stage in the life cycle and family formation. In each town the aim was to employ one woman with pre-school children, one with school-age children and one with no children living at home. The 12 participants (three each from four different mining towns) [21] were actively involved in the research design and questionnaire formulation and were trained as interviewers at an initial 2-day workshop to conduct recorded in-depth discussions with their friends and acquaintances [22]. They were each responsible for conducting and recording six discussions with women in their own social networks who had roughly the same family structure. In this way it was hoped that an established rapport would exist between interviewer and respondent and would be the basis for a more relaxed and revealing interview experience. The women received payment for their interviewing work and all expenses were covered to allow them to attend two workshops at a location that was central to all the towns. At the second workshop held later in the year, preliminary results were analysed, qualitative results discussed and possible interventions outlined.

I saw this project as a modified or post-modern form of action research. While I actively involved women in the process of researching their own situations with respect to shift working partners, the project had no underlying agenda of consciousness raising and direct group action. The initial training workshop and the later feedback workshop incorporated discussions of consciousness and action but there was no expectation on my part or that of the participants that a feminist political programme would or should

emerge. Instead, it was at these workshops with the 12 employed participants that some of the murkier issues to do with subjectivity, identity and politics began to be raised. In the workshops and over the kitchen tables where one-on-one interviews were conducted, the research project created and cultivated spaces in which a feminist politics (the transformation of gendered power relations) was performed in conversation and group discussion.

In the process of creating this political space, 'place' assumed some importance. The mining towns from which the participants were selected are places where homogeneity and mutual 'community' identification can easily be enforced by the dominant group. Unlike in cities where people "live together in relations of mediation among strangers with whom they are not in community" (Young, 1990, p. 303), in small mining 'communities' people foster links with each other through 'being the same' and excluding and ostracising anyone who is different [23]. Removing women from their 'community' was the first step in creating a discursive space in which to construct new political subjectivities.

Within the research team, various barriers could have stood in the way of political conversations. Many of the differences which divide and structure our everyday social experience were present in the group that assembled at the first training workshop—urban–rural born, married–unmarried, educated–uneducated, older–younger, childless–mother, adopted–not adopted, wealthy–poor, traditional–feminist, spiritual–materialist, new age–mainstream, fat–thin, forthcoming–shy, amongst others. In this group the decentredness of women's 'collective identity' and the overdetermined nature of subjectivity were patently obvious.

Throughout the workshops members of the research team inadvertently explored their differences with each other and with the other women they had interviewed, and of course with Joanne (the freelance community worker I employed as a co-researcher and local facilitator) and myself. In this space away from family, friends and 'community' women felt liberated to air differences without forcing conformity. I heard many comments prefaced by 'My life's not like that ... my husband's not like that ... of course things were different in those days than now ... well, you're younger than me ... some women must live in a very different situation than I do'. Openness to otherness was more pronounced among women from different towns, while within groups from the same town conflict was more likely to emerge as particular representations of town life or company actions were discussed and challenged.

For me the first workshop marked a transition in my relationship to the women I was employing, which was initially dominated by the hierarchy and differential power of the academic/mother and employer/employee relations. By the end of the workshop, one of the women who was most into differentiating herself and her particular experience from that of the others (especially because she was quite happy with her life and felt that others' complaints didn't ring true for her) expressed the view that even though I was a doctor I was really just one of them. This moment of identification referred primarily to one of my many subject positions, that of being a mother of small children, someone who could share in tales of childbirth, sleepless nights and the irrational frustrations of mothering. On the basis of this dimension of similarity I was somehow legitimated in her eyes, my power defused and her acceptance of me granted. I was homogenised and accepted into the fictional but collective unity 'mother'. In a different way Joanne (who was not a mother) was identified as a 'local' (that is, non-metropolitan), someone who experienced isolation, car breakdowns on outback roads and harsh climatic conditions, and partially accepted on that basis [24].

At the outset of the research the notion of 'partial identification' was undeveloped and for many of the participants the lack of identification with each other was uppermost in their minds. At the end of the second workshop both the idea and the act of partial identification had become more developed. Interestingly, what emerged was not what I would see as identification around the shared experience of women (the recognition that *as women* we shared a common 'problem'). In fact personal differences in gender experience widened on many fronts. What took place was identification with respect to common problems of a very specific kind (ones that many women would not share)—living with a shift worker (or in the case of Joanne and myself, living with a self-employed partner who worked long and irregular hours, often including weekends); particular place-specific forms of male discipline; union, company and university reluctance to consider family life in industrial relations.

In a sense my research process was constructing a partial but shared, externally related identity, and beginning to create a public knowledge about rosters and family life, about terror in the face of male power over women's ability to speak out, about women's mistrust of each other. The fiction of the 'mining shift worker's wife' I was encouraging or imposing became a momentary reality—a basis for communication about many of the contours of power affecting political activism in mining towns. These comments were made with acceptance and resignation:

> Women don't trust one another.

> We're powerless in the face of decisions about the roster—the men won't listen to just us.

Other comments were made with surprise and consternation:

> Many women confessed to hating the 7-day roster but they refused to be interviewed. Their husbands were forbidding them to be involved.

> Even women who are normally very strong and stroppy said they couldn't do it.

> The men are so suspicious, so them and us. They thought this survey would be used against them.

In the process of research the participants became open to otherness and aware of their own political capacities:

> This has made me realise that not all people can cope with the roster system, and just because things in my part of the world run smoothly, does not mean there is nothing wrong with the town I live in.

> The course has made me get off my bum and go out and talk to people. I usually stay at home in my little cocoon and don't go out and meet people. I find that having talked so much about what the people of this town need, instead of sitting back and waiting for everyone else to do the work and me reap the benefits, I now have to be a doer and not a talker. This is something new for me. I have never been one to go out and take action and motivate people. This will be a turning point in my life and, provided I follow it through, it should do me a lot of good.

> The ladies I have met and mixed with have given me the feeling that there is hope for the future, as they care about what is happening around them, and I thought we as a society had lost that ability.

> The research helped me rationalise my thoughts about the 7-day roster and was very helpful in coming to terms with many personal issues. It boosted my self-worth and gave me a sense of achievement and involvement in community and value other than as a housewife/mother.

In the political space created by this research project a new discourse of mine shift work and a new subjectivity of 'the mining shiftworker's wife' started to emerge. As women engaged in the myriad conversations that formed part of the research, they actively displaced the existing discourses of 'mining town women' and 'miner's wife' that confined their subjectivities. Out of this process a new subject position has developed—one that is focused on the gender division of labour and the impact of industrial conditions and disputes on relations within the home.

At present this research process has had a multitude of effects, many of which I am unaware. Those I do know about include the above mentioned emergence of a non-individualistic shift work discourse in mining communities in central Queensland. As companies discuss the possibility of introducing 12 hour shifts in the mining industry and long-distance commuting from the coast to new mines, the results of this research are circulating as an alternative way of thinking through the issues. A booklet that illustrates the research findings using cartoons and verbatim comments from women has been published by the union and distributed throughout the region, significantly aiding the circulation of the discourse of shift work and family life [25].

A new (the first) occasional child care centre has been built in Moura after attempts by one of the research participants (the one who felt she was ready to get off her bum) to set up a baby-sitting club failed. This woman took the research report along to the meeting to discuss the need for such a service and was able to influence the decision to establish the centre.

One of the women interviewed asked for the tape of her interview back, sat her husband down and made him listen to it. She then was able to broach her anger with him for spending all his days off from mine work at the new farm they had just purchased. Their interviewer was pleased to report that "Now they're like a pair of newly weds".

At some level the research is challenging the established discourse of industry policy—its boundaries, the actors it legitimises and its social effects. As women in all their diversity voice newly developed concerns around an issue of industry restructuring they enter wittingly or unwittingly an arena from which they have long been marginalised and excluded.

Conclusion

While I share no fundamental identity with any other person (as I am a unique ensemble of contradictory and shifting subjectivities), I am situated by one of the most powerful and pervasive discourses in social life (that of the binary hierarchy of gender) in a shared subject position with others who are identified, or identify themselves, as women. This subject position influences my entrée into social interactions and the ways I can speak, listen and be heard. In this sense I am enabled as a woman, to research with other women the conditions of our discursive construction and its effects.

As a feminist researcher, I am coming to understand my political project as one of discursive destabilisation. One of my goals is to undermine the hegemony of the binary

gender discourse and to promote alternative subject positions for gendered subjects. I see my research as (participating in) creating identity/subjectivity, and in that process as constituting alternative sites of power and places of political intervention. Whether in conversation with mining town women or with other feminist academic researchers. I understand my discursive interventions as constitutive rather than reflective, political as well as academic.

In my research I found the metaphors of 'conversation' and 'performance' much more useful in imagining a research strategy than the mining metaphors I had initially adopted. The mining metaphors constitute research as a process of discovery, of revelation: as researchers we reveal truths that are hidden from the untutored observer, contributing hitherto untapped resources to the permanent store of knowledge. By contrast, conversation and performance are metaphors of creation and interaction. Both processes are ephemeral, yet each may have long lasting effects upon thought and action. Conversations can produce alternative discourses that entail new subject positions, supplementing or supplanting those that currently exist. These new subject positions crystallise power in new sites, enabling novel performances—individual or group interventions in a variety of social locations. In this way the creation of alternative discourses subverts the power of existing discourses and contributes to their destabilisation.

This research process has provided insights for me into the practice of a new, post-modern feminist politics of difference. Action research need not focus upon the uncovering or construction of a unified consciousness upon which later interventions will be based. Action research can be a means by which we "develop political conversation(s) among a complex and diverse 'we' " (Brown, 1991, p. 81). Within these conversations we create the discursive spaces in which new subjectivities can emerge. As the centred subject with its historic political mission departs the social stage, there is now room to talk of the inescapability of difference and the only/ever partial nature of identification. Yet such talk does not precede or preclude politics. For the babble emanating from this discursive space is a political process without end, and without a (unified collective) subject. In an overdetermined world conversations are interventions/actions/changes in and of themselves, no matter whether they do or do not also give rise to further planned interventions.

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NOTES

[1] This is a common Australian saying which pronounces in decidedly emphatic tones a lack of knowledge.

[2] Following Nicholson (1990) I use the term 'post-modern' here and in the title of this paper to denote an intellectual movement within feminism and social theory more generally which is centred upon a critique of modernism in all its forms—from theory production to the production of buildings (see Watson & Gibson [1994] for an indication of the diversity of this movement). Following Barrett (1992) I use the term 'post-structural' to denote one theoretical strand within the post-modernism movement—that which focuses upon a critique of structural modes of thought, particularly in Marxian and socialist-feminist theory. The theoretical insights developed in this paper have been influenced most directly by this type of feminist post-modernism.

[3] And the argument that the category 'woman' is but a fiction of coherence which served the interests of the heterosexual contract (Butler, 1990) has shocked and confronted many.

[4] She writes, " 'the world from women's point of view' and 'the feminist standpoint' attempt resolution of the postfoundational epistemology problem by deriving from within women's experience the grounding for women's accounts. But this resolution requires suspending recognition that women's 'experience' is both thoroughly constructed and interpreted without end. Within feminist standpoint theory as well as much other modernist feminist theory, then, consciousness raising operates as feminism's epistemologically positivist moment" (Brown, 1991, p. 72). The discussion of 'women's experience' is, from this perspective, the creation of a discourse which imposes a fixed identity, rather than uncovering of an unmediated truth.

[5] Barrett talks of the 'turn to culture' within feminism as the interest in post-structuralist theory has prompted a shift away from "the social sciences' preoccupation with things" towards words and language. She claims that "[a]cademically, the social sciences have lost their purchase within feminist and the rising star lies with the arts, humanities and philosophy" (1992, pp. 204–205).

[6] The paper addresses similar issues to those Pratt (1993) has thoughtfully broached in relation to her own empirical research with Susan Hanson. I am aware that by talking retrospectively about the contours of my own research process I am creating a narrative of coherence out of a very random and haphazard set of experiences. I have attempted in this "temporary retrospective fixing" (Weedon, 1987, p. 25) to highlight the overdetermined nature of the research process and the significant role played by confusion and chance as well as design and planning. The research findings will not be reported here. They have been written up in a number of research reports and articles; see Gibson, 1991a, b, 1992a, b, 1993, also Gibson-Graham, 1994.

[7] In the years since the 1970s height of Australia's mining boom an interesting literature has grown up on the topic of women in (usually remote) mining towns. Much of the research has been conducted from a behavioural social scientific perspective and has been concerned with the adequate provision of services for women in these otherwise male dominated townships. Researchers have studied the general health and well-being of mining town women (see Sturmey, 1989, for a good summary of this literature), their mental health (Neil, *et al.*, 1983) and social networks (Cotterrell, 1984). The thrust of this work is an identification of the relative well-being and/or disadvantage of women living in these types of community where isolation, lack of family networks, lack of female employment possibilities, limited social services and company domination of social life prevail.

[8] An interesting aspect of this discourse is the precarious nature of women's position with respect to the working class in the mining industry. Metcalfe (1987) argues that the exclusion of women from the coal mining work-force in nineteenth-century Britain marked the active introduction (largely by the male union movement) of structured gender divisions within coal mining communities. These divisions were transplanted to the Australian industry. In the terms of this discussion, this historical precedent provided the conditions under which miners' wives could only ever be constituted as Other to the working-class miner.

[9] My focus upon public political organisations and actions was adopted as a research strategy, not because I privilege public over private politics.

[10] Now coal miners earn some of the highest wages of any occupational group in Australia and the bureaucratisation of dispute handling procedures and the imperative of meeting export contracts has reduced the number and average duration of strikes. Without what was accepted by themselves and their men as the 'legitimate' welfare role of the Women's Auxiliary, this organisation has disintegrated and along with it has gone one of the means by which women engaged in public, political discussion and activity for themselves, as well as for their men.

[11] In rural areas of Australia both rich and poor have traditionally supported the National (previously the

Country) Party which can only attain power at state or federal level in coalition with the Liberal (conservative) Party.

[12] Up until quite recently I have found myself lamenting the demise of the Concerned Women of Moura. I saw this dissolution as an indication of the weakly developed political resources available to women in mining towns. Upon further reflection and reading around the idea of a politics of difference I have become less discouraged by the momentary, and rather conversational nature of this type of political activism in which alliances and targeted actions give rise to particular results but not necessarily ongoing organisations. Iris Young's work has been inspirational in this context (1990).

[13] Whether the silencing was equally felt or not it is unclear. My discussions with the video makers were not extensive, so though it appears in the discussion that some of the concerns of 'working-class' women were silenced, there may have also been concerns shared by the 'management wives' which were not addressed.

[14] This political panic has been expressed in different ways across the range of theoretical interests within feminism, from standpoint theorist Nancy Hartsock's conspiratorial: "Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?" (1990, p. 163), to post-Marxist Michele Barrett's cautious: "Feminists recognize that the 'naming' of women and men occurs within an opposition that one would want to challenge and transform. Yet political silencing can follow from rejecting these categories altogether" (1991, p. 166), to post-structuralist Elizabeth Grosz's tongue-in-cheek rhetoric: "...if women cannot be characterised in any general way...then how can feminism be taken seriously? What justifies the assumption that women are oppressed as a sex? What, indeed, does it mean to talk about women as a category? If we are not justified in taking women as a category, then what political grounding does feminism have?" (1990, p. 341).

[15] Some, like Hartsock (1990, p. 163) have noted the unfair timing of the post-modern critique and called foul. Others, such as Hekman (1992) and Weedon (1987), accept the embarrassment and ambiguity or occupying a discursive space carved out by a political movement which was itself born of the emancipatory liberal humanism of modernist theory, and from that space of enunciation damning the very politics and epistemology which are its foundations.

[16] Brown (1991) has argued that in countering post-modern social fragmentation feminists need to orient their political conversations "towards diversity and the common, toward world rather than self" and she encourages us to engage in a "conversion of one's knowledge of the world from a situated (subject) position into a public idiom" (1991, pp. 80–81). In a similar vein Weedon emphasises the public realm, arguing that "in order for a discourse to have a social effect, [it] must at least be in circulation" (1987, pp. 100–111).

[17] The discourse of 'the field' is one that is undergoing an interesting deconstruction within anthropology. See, for example, D'Amico-Samuels (1991). A similar exercise is well overdue in geography and, not surprisingly, it is feminist geographers who have taken up the challenge. See, for example, Nast *et al.* (1994).

[18] See Coleman (1986) for a summary of this literature.

[19] There is only a very limited literature on the impact of these more unusual work schedules upon the partners, families and communities of shift workers. This is surprising in that, of all types of work, rotating shifts produce the most disruption of the family and household unit which functions around the more common day-oriented timetable of work, leisure and rest. See Banks (1956), and Hertz & Charlton (1989) for some examples of the limited literature on this topic.

[20] In framing the research project I was conscious of the disciplinary power that men, unions, the companies and the social service gatekeepers exercised over miners' wives in these communities. Negotiating permission from husbands, the unions, the service providers and the mining companies for these women to be involved was itself an interesting political exercise which is documented and discussed at length in a longer draft version of this paper.

[21] The four mining towns, Collinsville, Moranbah, Moura and Tieri were selected as the sites for the study on the basis of their differing ages and company affiliation.

[22] The interview schedule was straightforward and directed towards issues of concern to women (and, I would argue, men), rather than those of corporate interest. The questionnaire was designed to elicit information around the following topics: Who is providing all the unpaid labour which supports the physical and emotional needs of the shift worker? How much of the increased productivity gained by continuous production is being fuelled by an intensification of household labour? How does the increased tiredness and lack of weekends affect relations between workers and partners, workers and children and

partners and children—and workers and workers? How might a better understanding of women's experience of their partner's shift work patterns help men and women alike? What general feelings did women have about their town?

[23] In fact there are two (and probably multiple) communities in mining towns, one centred around mine management and professionals and the other around workers, each with their own disciplinary and homogenising practices.

[24] Mies (1991) has discussed this process of partial identification in feminist research whereby "...we proceed from our own contradictory state of being and consciousness. That is to say, not only do the 'other' women have a problem, but I do, too. ... This enables recognition of that which binds me to the 'other women' as well as that which separates me from them (1991, p. 79).

[25] The Queensland branch of the United Mineworkers Federation has printed 5000 copies of *Different Merry-Go-Rounds: families, communities and the 7-day roster* for distribution to its members and to the communities of central Queensland.

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