This paper represents my current position in a continued struggle with understanding postmodernist frameworks and their application: in relation to feminist enquiry and in relation to researching in the 'real world', which for me includes workplaces of the late 20th century. I seek your comment and guidance at the end to help me in some of my dilemmas.

The research I aim to do involves gender and training in organisations, especially in private enterprise. The framework I 'wrestle with' to help me get both a theoretical and methodological handle on the issues may be said to be postmodern feminism. This framework will be elaborated on later in the paper.

But first to the practicalities. Despite over a decade of EEO, Affirmative Action and Anti-Discrimination legislation women's average earnings still lag 18% behind that of men's (Statistics 1993)(ABS,
August, 1993) and women still cluster in a narrow range of occupational areas. Seventy-seven percent of all women workers are found in the four industries of Community Services (30% of women workers), Wholesale and Retail (23%), Finance, Property and Business (13%) and Recreation and Personal Services (11%) (ABS, May 1994). An analysis of occupations finds a clustering of women in certain lower occupational areas - making up 77% of all clerks, 73% of sales and personal service workers and 51% of unskilled workers (ABS, May 1994).

Evidence exists that while women receive somewhat more on-the-job training, it is not accredited. There are implications here for climbing the Structural Efficiency principle ladder and receiving promotion to jobs with tenure, greater responsibility and higher pay.

There now exists a body of research on education and training regarding women's participation and outcomes in the schooling, TAFE and university systems. However, there appears to be less known about women's training/learning in organisations. Once women become wage earners it appears that their gender is obscured under their 'worker' categorisation. There has been some recent and valuable work on women and skill (e.g. Jackson 1991, Windsor 1991, Cox and Leonard 1992, Kenna 1993) and women and enterprise bargaining (Hall and Fruin, 1994) however, other than the work of Kokkinos and Robinson (1991) on women in local government there appears to be a dearth of research regarding women and training and specifically on how women are the faring under the Training Reform Agenda (TRA).

It is my supposition that the obscuring of gender in the official discourse of the TRA and in workplaces masks some very real issues for women and training. It is also my supposition that many factors that have worked against women's participation in the formal education and training systems in the past and have been partially redressed in those systems are also to be found 'at work'.

Admittedly, EEO and Affirmative Action strategies have ensured greater opportunities for women in the public sector through access to employment, permanency, training and promotion. Although it is sometimes contested that these provisions have mainly advantaged white, middle class, educated women (Yeatman 1990), at least there now exists a clearer picture of where women are placed and the opportunities open to them through the levels of the public service.

The picture is by no means so transparent in the private sector. Research on women in organisations has mainly concentrated on the 'top end' of women in middle to senior management (e.g. Still, 1992) but the position of women at lower levels in organisations (where the majority of women in paid employment are placed) and their access to
opportunities, including their participation in and use of training, has not been fully explored. Discussions with the Affirmative Action Agency indicate that the women and training issue is still very much on its agenda: relevance and timeliness of training, paid or unpaid time for training, on or off the job training and related child care are all sub-issues of concern.

My research interest covers these issues and more. I want to know whether the Training Reform Agenda, the 'new deal' for upskilling workers has supported women's learning in organisations. I am interested in other 'training' factors in gendered workplaces such as women's experience of the training culture in the workplace and management's perceptions of the training opportunities made available to women. I am interested in women in different occupational groups, at differing levels of employment and employed on different terms (e.g. full-time, part-time, casual) in organisations. Age and ethnicity of the women may also be factors that need to be taken into account. It is important to understand the position for a wide range of women not only those who are in management positions, nor those who come from only non-ethnic, middle class backgrounds like myself.

I propose to use a postmodern feminist epistemology to inform this study because it appears to offer ways in which to analyse the dominant discourse surrounding 'women', 'training' and 'organisations' and to deconstruct what happens in organisations. I see this perspective as valuable in understanding the subtle power relations at work at both policy, workplace rhetoric and workplace reality levels and for tracking the points where resistance or emancipatory action may take place. This approach is not without its problems and dilemmas, however.

In this paper I will explore the key features of feminist postmodernism, examine the feminist case against postmodernism and explore how postmodern feminist approaches can be translated into methodology. I will give an example of the use of a feminist postmodernist approach to discourse analysis. Finally, I will explore some of the problematics, which arise in using a postmodern feminist approach to my research question.

Postmodernist Feminism

Weedon (Weedon 1987: 40) describes postmodern feminism as:

a mode of knowledge production which uses postmodernist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change.
To elaborate, she sees the key features of feminist postmodernism as revolving around an understanding of:

1. The production of meaning through language

Lyotard (1984) has rejected the dominant discourses or meta-narratives that have shaped western thinking and attributes their demise to the information age. Foucault (1977) has revealed discourses hitherto forgotten, buried or 'fallen off the edge'. The dominant discourse of white or western supremacy has been contested by discourses of black and postcolonial rights, the discourse of male privilege by the discourses of the women's movements, the discourse of heterosexuality by the gay and lesbian discourses (Although it must be said that these political 'rights' movements have their roots in the Enlightenment and modernity rather than post-modernity, they do produce discourses, which compete with the dominant discourse and prompt political action.). Suffice to say that what knowledge is and who is privileged to produce it are now by no means clear nor set.

Language constructs reality and constructs an individual's subjectivity within it. Language privileges certain discourses and power relations over others. Deconstructing language and the dominant discourse unpacks the power relations. Paying attention to what is there as well as what is not there exposes both the knowledge (and the knowledge makers) that is privileged and that which is denied. The production of knowledge through discourses which challenge and compete with the dominant discourse makes visible what has been marginalised or forgotten. Both of these approaches are part of the postmodern feminist project.

2. The nature of subjectivity

In contrast to the Enlightenment concept of the individual having an immutable essence/fixed subjectivity, postmodernism suggests that subjectivity changes with shifts in the discursive field. Weedon (1987) suggests that women are the subjects of a range of conflicting/contradictory discourses for example motherhood, career woman. The discursive fields of sexuality, the law, medicine, the media etc. have had and do have profoundly contradictory effects on women's lives. Weedon (1987) maintains that experience does not have an essential meaning but is given meaning through the language of different discourses. Postmodern feminism does not have an essentialist view of woman but rather sees the construction of woman as relative to the discursive field.

3. The nature of power
Just as the retreat of the meta-narrative and the increased recognition of differences leads to lessened common ground for political alliances, the exercise of power becomes more diffuse, less easy to track, less concrete.

Fraser (1989) points out that Foucault's account of power differs from the liberal or Enlightenment account. The Enlightenment view is one of a power resting in the sovereign and imposing itself on subjects.

In contrast, the Foucauldian account of power views it as local, continuous, productive, capillary and exhaustive - that is, not residing in state-centred and economistic political orientations but circulating through even the smallest conduits in the social body. Foucault sees power not instantiated in governments or dominant classes but in sexuality, family, schools, medicine, psychiatry, social science - these are political phenomena which form the webs and nets of power. Power is manifested not through who it resides in but how it is exercised, through 'the technologies of the self'. Fraser (1989) maintains that power is not exercised through our heads but through our bodies and Foucault's genealogies describe how bodies have been made docile through the technologies of the self.

Feminism, back to the first wave, has always acknowledged that power plays an overwhelming role in shaping the lives of women. Feminist postmodernism acknowledges the shift and subtleties in power relations and unpacks seemingly benevolent discourses such as the flexibility discourse.

Postmodern feminism has adopted the less pessimistic approaches of postmodernism in maintaining that human beings can reflect on discursive relations and are capable of resistance at point in the power relations.

Lather (1991) views the selfconscious and self contradictory nature of postmodern feminism as a way of avoiding dogmatism and essentialism.

Heckman (1990) argues that postmodernism and feminism have much in common. Postmodernism challenges dualisms, while feminism challenges the male/female dichotomy. Both critique the Enlightenment knowledge production and challenge the foundations of western thought and structure. Heckman further affirms that postmodernism and feminism are mutually corrective: post modernism balances feminisms tendency to an essentialist view of woman (especially in feminist standpoint epistemology, while feminism completes the postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment dualism by defining those dualisms as gendered.

Feminists see the gendered basis of the Enlightenment thought but postmodernist thought expands and concretises that vision. (Heckman 1990:8).

Other feminisms, especially liberal feminism, are seen as being caught
in the gendered trap of Enlightenment knowledge production while attempting to critique gendered power relations.

The view above is certainly not shared by all feminists. There is a strong feminist case against postmodernism, which must be acknowledged. (e.g. Brodribb 1992, Alcoff 1994). The major direction of this critique involves the charges of:

- **relativism** - in rejecting dualisms postmodern feminism rejects the possibility of a woman centred epistemology as much as a man centred one

- **recognition of differences** to the extent that generalisations about women cannot be made, thus weakening political claims

- **nihilism** and thus the inability to inform liberating political action

- **phallocentricism** - gender is not an issue in almost all postmodernist writing and all is written by men

- **denial of the central values** of the Enlightenment including the ideal of 'rights', which has been foundational in both the first and second waves of feminism.

The feminist case against postmodernism may be summed up as Heckman (1990:155) does;

> Just as women are realising the possibility of overcoming their marginalisation, postmodernism is denying them their place in the sun.

While taking into account this critique of postmodern feminism, I suggest that while modernist feminisms have undoubtedly advanced the feminist cause light years, it appears that feminism as a political project has hit something of a brick wall. The discourse of the feminist project has been appropriated by other powerful voices. Governments, organisations, managers espouse the 'right thing', however 'resistance' to the feminist cause has become more subtle. It is now also harder to define where the power is and where political action should be directed, it is harder to see what the language masks. I suggest that a postmodernist feminism may usefully tackle some of these subtleties.

I also suggest that a Foucauldian analysis of the discourses surrounding training and women and a deconstruction of the language of those involved in organisations (both through documentation and verbal language as text) may be useful in finding the localised sites where the feminist project has come up 'against the wall' and where action and resistance can occur. I am also interested in finding those
'enabling' points in organisations, which have fostered women's development. I do not regard the picture as all bad but am interested in getting into organisations and locating these points of 'help' or 'hindering' in the power relations.

At the level of discourse the Training Reform Agenda, particularly as it was conceived from 1989-1992, has not been particularly attentive to the needs of women. There is little evidence, however, as to whether it has hindered or helped women. The following section briefly analyses some of the discourse surrounding the TRA.

The Discourse of the Training Reform Agenda

As previously stated, Foucault (1977) maintained that language is not transparent; that it constructs the social reality, constructs meaning and represents broadly political interests. In his view language is a cross referencing system in which powerful groups and interests attempt to say what the world is really like. This constructs a dominant discourse or series of dominant discourses within society.

Foucault also maintained that the postmodernist world is made up not of discrete power blocs as in the Marxist schema (i.e the owners of the means of production) but of much more diffuse power webs and interrelationships, some sharing discourse, while others are the source of competing discourses. Derrida (1976) theorised that it is the power relations within discourse which shape society and viewed key phrases, metaphors and images as points of possible paradox and sites of deconstructive analysis. Derrida cautioned that attention needs to be paid to repressed terms, oppositions and hierarchies in language, to what is left out as well as to what is included.

What then is the discursive field into which the rhetoric of education and training in Australia in the 90's fits? Whose political interests are being served in this discourse? Whose interests are obscured?

In a previous paper (Wallace 1993), I reached the following conclusions regarding the discursive field of the training reform Agenda:

• The discursive field is based around the tenets of economic rationalism and human capital theory

• It assumes that more training (and the meaning of that is by no means clear yet) will, in turn, lead to greater skills, which will in turn lead to higher productivity.

• The move to increased centralism, uniformity, bureaucratisation, standards and accountability reflect the corporatist approach of
government.

- Education is viewed through a techno-bureaucratic lens and is valued only as a contribution to productivity

- The discourse is controlled by industry, generally large organisations and transnationals and to a lesser extent government and unions. It is industry which serves to benefit most from the implementation of the discourse.

The Gender Issues in the Training Reform Agenda

Morrow (1992: 3) suggests that the Training Reform Agenda has been generated by male dominated industry and labour market institutions, which have been none too willing to advance women's interests in the past.

I suggest that the interests of women are obscured in the rhetoric, in the actual language of the TRA.

The wide range of documents regarding the TRA are generally silent on gender with the exceptions of a small part of one chapter in the Finn Report (AEC, 1991) and a section on equity in the Carmichael Report (ESFC, 1992). That an addendum to the National Policy and Guidelines, Eliminating Bias in the Development of National Competency Standards (National Training Board, 1991) had to be issued after the fact of the 'main' policy document is indicative of how gender issues had been ignored. That the National Strategy from the Australian National Training Authority has had to undergo nine drafts is also indicative of the ways gender (and equity issues in general) had to be contested by interest groups.

In the official discourse of the TRA it is as if gender issues did not exist among workers or potential workers. Gender issues have been subsumed within the larger issues regarding skilling, productivity and the long term fix. Men and women are collapsed into an group needing training investment. There also appears to be an assumption that the equity provisions regarding the education of girls and young women, EEO and Affirmative Action in the workplace have 'worked' and women are no longer perceived as being disadvantaged. At the very least the continuation of such interventions will place them on the same level of need as men.

Other official documentation of the TRA such as the Mayer Report (AEC and MOVEET, 1993), the Arrangement for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Australia (VEETAC, 1993) and the Workplace Trainer Competency Standards (CSB - Workplace Trainers, 1992) and Assessor Competency...
Standards (CSB -Assessors, 1993) are couched in ostensibly gender neutral terms - in some, pronouns and nouns that relate to human beings are absent altogether. It is interesting to note in the Mayer Report (AEC, MOVEET,1993) early objections by women's interests to the male gendering of examples related to some of the competency levels have been taken on board and the examples are now more gender neutral or inclusive. Is this a way in which the language has been sanitised or appropriated or is it a genuine attempt to redefine the terrain positively for women?

Thus there exists a significant lack of gender focus in the TRA discourse. The question now is: Does this obscuring of gender exist also in the workplace and does it mask some very real problems for women? And how can a postmodern feminist approach to research open up these issues?

Methodology

Before answering the question above and posing some to you I will outline the part of my proposed line of inquiry, which is relevant to this paper.

I propose to become involved as a researcher with four organisations: two which have recently been identified as 'best practice' organisations in the area of training by the Affirmative Action Agency and two which have been identified by Industry Training Boards (ITB's) as 'best practice' organisations in implementing the Training Reform Agenda.

In each organisation I propose to examine official policy documentation regarding training (eg. training plans) as well as any EEO or AA documentation. In addition I propose to interview management (senior management, HR or training manager) regarding its attitude to women and training. Documented and analysed, this may be regarded as the dominant discourse of the organisation regarding women and training. I expect that this discourse will be 'politically correct' especially at the written or policy level. There may/or may not be differences between the AA organisations and the TRA organisations at this level of discourse.

I then propose to interview women of their experience of the training culture in the organisation and how it has related to their working lives. The differences among women and their experiences will be acknowledged and no attempt will be made to silence the diversity of women's voices. I also propose to interview others in the organisation who may be part of the 'webs and nets of power' not necessarily senior management but those who have an informal influence, perhaps supervisors, colleagues - identified by the women themselves or through
other sources. As the point of this is to track helping as well as hindering locations of power I do not see it as a witch hunt, however this may be problematic. Again there may be a difference in 'enabling' training between AA and TRA organisations, perhaps the situation for women will be worse/ or better in TRA organisations. Perhaps a deconstruction of the AA 'best practice' organisations will reveal that all is not as it seems. I may even find that some women work against their own or other women's interests.

I propose to view the interviews as 'text' and use as a basis the deconstructive strategies expounded by (Martin 1994: 355) below:

1. Dismantling a dichotomy - exposing a false distinction.
2. Examining silences - what is not said
3. Attending to disruptions and contradictions
4. Focusing on the element that is most alien in the context to expose dissonances
5. Interpret metaphors as a rich source of meaning
6. Analyse double entendres
7. Separate group-specific and more general sources of bias by reconstructing the text with iterative substitution of phrases.
8. Exploring with careful reconstructions the unexpected ramifications and inherent limitations of minor policy changes.
9 Using the limitations exposed by reconstruction to explain the persistence of the status quo and the need for more ambitious change programs.

How are these proposed methods for seeing inside organisations and women's working lives informed by postmodernist feminism? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?

Essentialism/Relativism
I suggest that the acknowledgment of difference and diversity among women and the effort to avoid essentialist categorisation is consistent with postmodern feminism (Lather 1994, Martin 1994) and can be considered a strength in this approach. However, it must also be acknowledged that there are weaknesses inherent in this practice as Martin (1994: 637) states:

If categories exist that do not conceal difference they will be so specific as to stultify intellectual enquiry. Even when a category is so hedged around with qualifications that only one individual falls within it, difference will still be masked; as postmodernism informs us, an individual is different from one time to the next.

The researcher needs to tread a fine line between false unity and a false difference that makes the research process unworkable. This researcher must decide the categories that uncover the differences that are most important and that fit the practical and theoretical purposes of the study.
Power/Knowledge
By dissolving the male/female, powerful/powerless dichotomies it is more possible to track the ways power is exercised in organisations, including the way the women exercise power. However, there is a danger that the women question, which after all is the focus of this study may become blurred or lost.

Attention to Language
Through attention to language both the official discourse regarding women and training and competing formal and informal discourses may be uncovered and analysed. Through the use of specific deconstructive strategies dissonances may be pinpointed. The danger here is that the researcher may get lost in an everlasting spiral of deconstruction without drawing any conclusions.

This researcher also has concerns that the research also be true to the feminist ideals in its methodological approach.

Fonow and Cook (1991) enumerate a number of principles of feminist methodology. They include;

1. The need to acknowledge and act reflexively regarding the pervasive influence of gender - making women the focus of research, examining biased assumptions about scientific objectivity and acknowledging the gendered nature of the researcher herself.

2. The importance of consciousness raising as a research tool.

3. The need to challenge the norm of objectivity, which places a distance between the researcher and researched and infers that personal experiences are unscientific.

4. Concern for the ethical implications and recognition of the possible exploitation of women.

5. Emphasis on the empowerment of women and transformation of patriarchal social institutions through research.

Lather (1994) discusses the need for postmodern feminist research to be praxis oriented, self reflexive, empowering and reciprocal. Stanley and Wise (1993) advocate a feminist ethic in research, where theory is consonant with experience, where the researcher is reflexive, is on the same critical plane as those she researches and does not assume an intellectually superior stance and where:

No opinion or belief or other construction of events and persons, no
matter from whom this derives, should be taken as a representation of 'reality' but rather treated as a motivated construction or version to be subject to critical feminist analytical enquiry. (Stanley and Wise 1993: 200).

Opie (1992) warns against the researcher appropriating the voices of women.

So where would this research fit on a feminist axis of 'good practice'?

This research is about and for women in that it attempts to track factors that work for women's betterment and which hinder women in organisations in regard to training. The norms of objectivity are challenged in paying attention to the stories of the women. The gendered, non-ethnic, middle class nature of the researcher is acknowledged.

The main concerns I have lie in entering organisations as an outsider and the questions I ask are these:

How will the inevitable distance between the researcher and researched affect the study? And how is it possible to relate to all the women, management and others?

What are the ethical implications, particularly regarding the women involved?

Is there room for consciousness raising, reciprocity and empowerment?

How can this researcher develop a reflexivity that feeds into and enriches the research process?

You may have many more questions and can see pitfalls I have overlooked.

Over to you.

References


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