

**(Re)Emerging Subjectivities:
A Postmodern Feminist Perspective on Subjectivity,
Agency and Change**

by

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I declare that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted either in whole or part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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ABSTRACT

The impact of postmodernism in social theory has led to a reconceptualisation of approaches to knowledge generation and subjectivity. This thesis is particularly concerned with the nature of subjectivity and its role in agency and social change.

The central themes in this thesis have shifted over time and this research reflects the changing context of theory and knowledge development more generally. While this research has consistently been located in a critique of positivism and many aspects of Enlightenment thought, many of my earlier assumptions reflected modernist views of truth and a desire for universal theorising based on a linear view of progress leading to emancipation. However, during the research, contradictions and inconsistencies appeared in my encounters with research participants, highlighting the inadequacies of modernist views of truth and universal approaches to theorising. These developments resulted in a reconceptualisation of the central themes of this research consistent with the postmodern challenge to metanarratives and the unified subject of modernism.

Theoretically and methodologically this work is located within postmodern feminist approaches, utilising feminist personal narrative and narrative analysis in research with youth workers and young people. The research emphasises researcher subjectivity and reflection and the role of the researcher as an active participant in the research.

The findings of this research suggest that a capacity for agency in the decentered subject of postmodernism may develop through a person's conscious and reflective relationship with multiple subjective constructions. Importantly, the discourse of pain and vulnerability may hold subversive potential in disrupting dominant social discourses of subjectivity and truth, leading to possibilities for political action and change.

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These reams of paper feel like my life's work. Even though others have repeatedly told me not to think of my thesis in this way, it has been unavoidable. It has changed my life, my work, my relationships and my sense of myself. Over the duration of this work I have met, worked with, and been supported by, some of the most significant people I have ever known. While there are many and I thank them all most sincerely, some stand out and as such need to be mentioned.

This work stands on the shoulders of four young people and five youth workers who gave not only their time and energy, but the story of their lives, to this research. I struggle to know the best way to express my thanks to these people. For long periods of time they met with me; talked about their lives, which often involved horrendously painful memories; read transcripts; talked more; listened to my story; thought about my ideas; answered my questions - and then they entrusted all of this to me, on tape, to do with as I saw fit. In anyone's language that is a big ask. Clearly, this thesis would not have been produced without their stories; it is the substance to this work. And I can also say without hesitation that the experience, for me, of being with and listening to these people, has changed the way I look at life. I know that's a big statement to make, but this has felt like a big time in my learning and growing. So, to those people who must remain nameless, my sincerest thanks for trusting me and for inspiring me to complete this work.

Without the continued support of my three supervisors, Dr Mal McCouat, Dr Colin Peile, and Dr Yvonne Darlington, neither I, nor this piece of work, would have survived. All three have provided me with an amazing level of support and guidance and I feel blessed to have had their professional guidance over these years.

Dr McCouat has been involved since the inception of this work, despite his resignation from the School a number of years ago. Over the duration of my thesis Mal's challenges and gentle guiding, combined with his support, affection and sensational belief in me and my work, was often my incentive to push on. So many times I talked with Mal about my uncertainties and hopes and he never failed to encourage me to trust myself, my feelings and my intuition about this work - a rare and valuable quality in a supervisor of a thesis such as mine. Mal has continued his involvement through to the completion, and his input and enthusiasm has never waned.

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I knew that finding a person to transcribe my tapes would be a difficult task. Not only was it a long and tiresome job but I felt very strongly that this person must ‘feel’ right to me. It felt like a serious responsibility - to choose someone who, like me, would have intimate knowledge of the lives of the participants in this research. I had to trust them and sense that they would treat these tapes, these lives, with the respect and privacy that they demanded. And then I found Ethel. Ethel Kaboth promptly, efficiently and accurately transcribed every tape from every interview in this research with a level of integrity and respect that I had only hoped for. My sincerest and most profound thanks, Ethel.

Over the years of this thesis I have taught many hundreds of students in the School of Social Work and Social Policy and through this experience I have learnt a great deal about the issues of concern to this research. I want to make special note of the students who have taken my Feminist Social Work Practice subject over the years. These students have joined with me in a learning experience that has been, without a doubt, my greatest joy as a teacher; and many of these graduates are now dear friends and colleagues who have journeyed along with me as I have completed this thesis. For their inspiration, encouragement and belief in me and in the broader transformative and egalitarian possibilities of feminism, I thank them all very sincerely.

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“Rabbit’s clever,” said Pooh thoughtfully.

“Yes,” said Piglet, “Rabbit’s clever.”

“And he has Brain.”

“Yes,” said Piglet, “Rabbit has Brain.”

There was a long silence.

“I suppose,” said Pooh, “that that’s why he never understands anything.”

(A.A. Milne, The House at Pooh Corner, London: Methuen, 1928, p.130.)

PREFACE

Consistent with feminist approaches to research, it has been important to me to consciously place myself in this research from its inception. This preface begins that process by locating some of my personal experiences in the wider context of the research.

Many of the questions that have arisen in my thesis have relevance for and from my own life. It is evident to me that my own experiences and views have influenced the direction of my work. In my own life I have felt there to be a connection between my past experiences and my present life and I have actively pursued these connections, exploring the ways in which beliefs from my childhood influence my ability to make choices and live a life that makes me happy. For me, the way in which I have come to understand my own subjectivity has been influenced by my earlier experiences and the social and political context in which I live.

One of the most persistent themes in my experience of this research is the tension between relativism and universalism in the current state of knowledge generation. On the one hand I have attempted to write my 'version' of the research, presenting my narrative with my interpretations. In this relativist way I have embraced my own subjectivity as a researcher and been clear that this research is situated in the context of my interpretations and is therefore, limited. However, on the other hand, I have also wanted to contribute to a broader concern for social change and this has been the motivating purpose of my research. I want these ideas and thoughts to be actively engaged with and not dismissed as one interpretation or story with no relevance or application outside my own experience. Not only do both of these (contradictory) positions exist in this work, but they are also apparent in other aspects of my life. It appears that this tension is a feature of the time in which we live.

It has not been possible for me to proceed with this research – concerned as it is with questions of subjectivity, knowledge, truth and change - without being confronted with this tension. I have attempted to dismiss and avoid it, and to resolve it. After considerable time and angst I am now attempting to honour it and give it pride of place, simply because it seems to be the most persistent and pervasive theme in the course of

my research. And also because it is my hope that the sense of discomfort that this tension has brought to my work (and the work of others), may well contain within it some important ideas about the possibilities for future research, practice and theory.

My past experiences, particularly as a child and adolescent have shaped many of my views and beliefs as an adult and many of the themes from my earlier life – issues such as self-esteem, inadequacy, competition, difference, truth, pain and vulnerability - are central to this thesis. Many events in my childhood resulted in feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt as I compared myself to my siblings (I was the youngest child with one sister and two brothers) and their achievements. My relationships with my siblings were such that competition was inevitable and yet I had a sense that I had nothing of value with which to compete.

Also, in my early life I was exposed to the painful and horrific experience of sexual abuse; an experience that was formative in my life in terms of shattering my sense of self and my sense of the world as a safe place. Although this man was not a member of my immediate family, I was unable to share my experiences with my parents or siblings. I was unable to describe the enormity of my feelings and the agony and loathing I felt inside. For many years I did not speak to a soul about these experiences until I myself had removed them from my conscious mind, ‘forgetting’ what it actually was that brought about this ugliness I felt inside me so readily and consistently.

When I was 12 years old my parents bought a hotel in the country. My family life became increasingly unhappy and while my grades at school had not been wonderful, slow deterioration became rapid failure in my school life. By the time I reached Grade 10 I had failed significantly. My report card read of 2’s and 3’s and a child who really could not handle the rigours of any sort of basic academic demand. My mother and I went to talk to the principal of the school about my subject selection for Grade 11. He informed my mother and me that ‘the truth’ of it was that I simply did not have the ability to continue with my education at senior level. While this was unfortunate, he believed it to be the case and stated that it would be a waste of time for me, the school, and my family, for me to continue. I am still unsure about why I was so determined to continue with my schooling, but I was and I did. I completed my secondary education with a pass, although not a significant enough one to enter University.

I worked for several years in the University of Queensland Undergraduate Library until a colleague told me to stop complaining and lamenting my unrealised career and go out there and do something about it. It was just what I needed. I enrolled in a TAFE course in Social Welfare and got three high distinctions and one distinction. It was my first successful attempt to challenge 'the truth'.

Truth for me has been complex and multi-layered. My headmaster's attempts to tell my mother and me the 'truth' were definitions I did not share and yet they became my truth. I believed them and internalised them. Layer upon layer. Certainly no one asked me why my grades were sliding so furiously. There was always a deeper and more complex truth inside me to explain those circumstances. My truth about my childhood experiences of sexual abuse and other traumatic events was hidden but fundamental in determining how I felt and lived in the world, and what choices I made. There was not one truth for me, nor was there anything simple about my truths. These stories, and many others from my early life, shaped and influenced the ways in which I thought about myself and who I was. They have clearly contributed to my interest in the issues of concern to this research.

Given my struggle with traditional conceptions of truth in my life and my reluctance to accept the definitions of others as necessarily accurate, it is interesting that I pursued an academic career. Without a doubt, part of my interest in academia was in the opportunity that I saw to prove myself intellectually, to make a clear statement to my family and myself about my intelligence. On some level I was convinced that if I could succeed at academia I would banish these doubts that had plagued me all my life about my intellectual capacity.

However, my conscious attraction to academia was in the possibilities for exploring and increasing the connections between the different aspects of social work and social change. I was interested in a form of academic activism and the possibilities that might emerge from this for my commitment to social change. While to some extent this has been effective, it has not been without its struggles and disappointments. I have struggled with the traditional academic environment that continues to value a one-dimensional understanding of truth and knowledge. In my experience of (social work) academia in Australia, the lack of credibility for feminism and postmodernism is astounding. The

traditional conservative approach to universities is alive here, as it is elsewhere, with increasing pressures on academics to conform to market driven forces rather than promote the importance of critical thought. The chances for academic activism seem to be greatly reducing. If our universities promote only one version of the truth, as the only truth, and only one method for understanding the truth, as the only method, students will graduate without experiencing the richness that comes from exploring and critiquing and from understanding and working with the complexity of our lives.

There is also a significant level of influence from my earlier life in terms of my choice of theory and methodology for this thesis. Clearly feminism was attractive to me because of my personal experiences of being a young female in my family and many of my earlier experiences of being a woman in this society. Theoretically and methodologically therefore, I have been drawn to, and emphasised, certain aspects that others may not have, given their different experiences¹.

My commitment to feminism as a way of living my life has been both rewarding and challenging. The integrity and consistency that a feminist perspective encourages has challenged me to strive for a more integrated approach in my own life. Through my own experiences I have found that tension arises when there are discrepancies and inconsistencies between what I say and what I do. Naming the reality of my life, including my limitations and the less desirable areas of myself, has allowed me to accept who I am, as I am. I think this may also be true of social change. Accurately naming what we as a society are doing and why, the benefits of this for some and the incredible costs for most, facilitates an awareness of the need for change.

As a feminist and as a lesbian, I have grappled first hand with the personal manifestations of intolerance of difference in our society. In so many ways this intolerance works subtly and subversively in our society now, so the extent to which it affects opportunities in life is often unclear. Because people have been silenced for their inappropriate statements and actions rather than challenged for the underlying beliefs and attitudes that give rise to these comments and behaviours, these opinions are manifested in increasingly

¹ In order to address this issue, as much as is practically and consciously possible, I have paid attention to the ways in which my personal experiences have influenced and shaped this work and I have used this as another form of research material to be explored and processed.

undetectable and subtle ways. This is a critical issue in our world generally but it is of great significance to me in my state and my country. Over the past several years Australia (and particularly Queensland) has experienced an upsurge of ultra-right wing conservatism expressed in an intolerance and ignorance toward Indigenous people and people from other countries resident here, especially people from Asian origin and those seeking refuge and asylum in this country.

My friends, colleagues and I agree that political and personal activism are imperative. But it is also clear that previous ways of agitating for change have not been completely successful in altering people's fundamental attitudes and beliefs. My feeling is that something significant and substantial needs to shift in the way in which we think about change, equality and justice – that there is something that we are missing in our attempts to change the way we live together.

This brings me to my current position in our society and to the tension that exists for me, and many others, between our marginalised positions and our positions of privilege. For the majority of time that I have spent working on this thesis I have been employed as a lecturer in a prestigious university in an affluent country.² I cannot fail to acknowledge my privilege in the same breath as acknowledging the ways in which my difference marginalises and oppresses me. The complex interaction between these forces is significant in this thesis and I believe it is significant in terms of achieving change. If change is to occur in a fundamental manner, I believe it will be necessary for people in positions of privilege to be active on behalf of other more marginalised and powerless groups. And all of us will also need to be prepared to acknowledge not only the ways in which we are oppressed by others but also the ways in which we act as oppressors to other people.

My position of privilege has been reinforced to me most acutely through my interactions with people of cultures different to mine. The Indigenous people of this country have been and continue to be one of the most marginalised and oppressed cultural groups in the world. The way in which Australian society has persisted in refusing to acknowledge

² For eight years I was employed as a Lecturer in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at The University of Queensland, Australia. I subsequently resigned from my academic position and returned to social work practice and private consultancy in the non-government community sector.

and compensate Indigenous people for the colonisation of their country and the subsequent murder and rape of their people and their land is a national tragedy and a disgrace. Coming to terms with the ways in which I, as a member of the dominant culture, have benefited (and continue to benefit) from this ongoing oppression has been both humbling and motivating for me in terms of recognising the imperative for change in my own society. I have learnt so much from listening to Indigenous people talk with honesty and feeling about their lives and their histories. The generosity of spirit displayed by these people has touched me deeply and fundamentally.

I also had the experience of attending the United Nations 4th World Congress on Women's NGO Forum in Beijing in 1995. Over 35,000 women from countries throughout the world gathered to talk about and share their experiences of being female in a male dominated world. I went to the forum to listen and learn and share my own work and experiences. This experience had a profound effect on me and as a result I revised much of my worldview.

My ignorance was apparent and I felt the helplessness of suddenly being out of my depth, where my knowledge was instantly irrelevant. I realised that I had no idea about the depth of struggle and the reality of life in this world for the overwhelming majority of people. My own experiences were clearly full of privilege and affluence in comparison.

I remember sitting with my partner having tea in a tent near our accommodation site and watching and listening to a group of Indian women sing and dance (they told us they were having a meeting). One Indian woman approached us and began to talk about her life and work in a small village in India. She spoke of the deaths of her sisters, her mother and her mother's mother, through the practice known as dowry death and through male violence generally. She spoke of the poverty, malnutrition and the struggle to survive from one day to the next. I was speechless, confronted for the first time with the presence of such extreme and painful suffering previously outside my immediate experience. It was not that I had not before encountered suffering in my own life and the lives of many others that I have known and worked with. It was also not that I had not heard these stories and seen these issues on television or read about them in books and magazines. It was that for the first time here was the reality in front of me - a woman speaking honestly and passionately and emotionally about her life, about the tragedy of

life for her people. And it was then that I realised my cultural and social biases and prejudices - biases and prejudices I did not even know existed. I realised that I had no idea; the theories I knew, the books that I had read, the issues that I fought for, suddenly meant very little in this context. I was a white Anglo privileged feminist with little idea about the reality of so many other women's lives and I was shocked and disappointed in myself.

My position of privilege had blinded me to the reality of so many other people's lives, to the point that I did not even have an awareness of my ignorance and inability to appreciate their perspectives as unique and different from mine. I was unaware of the ways in which my knowledge base was not only unable, but more importantly inappropriate, to 'know' about these women's lives. I also, of course, had previously been unaware and unable to see the ways in which my privilege, by virtue of my country's affluence, contributed to the oppression of these women and their communities and countries.

The way in which our society separates our personal stories - our feelings and emotions and subjective accounts - from the sanitised and detached understandings communicated through education, academia, and the channels of more popular culture like the media, ensures our own emotional and subjective ignorance of these complex and painful issues. In my experience, emotional responses are highly significant motivators for change. While we continue to repress our own subjectivity and emotions our possibilities for change may be limited, individually and socially.

In this thesis I have attempted to embrace my own subjectivity, explicitly including emotional responses, as well as the subjectivities and emotions of those people who participated in the research. I have elevated these to a central and important position thereby attempting to challenge the intellectual and social practice of dismissing and marginalising how we feel. I argue for this focus as a potent force for social change.

While my hope is that this work appears coherent and consistent, I also hope that this coherency is coupled with a transparency that conveys the agonising, the contradictions, the disappointments, the flaws and limitations, and the triumphs in the process of its creation.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose and Aims of the Research

The purpose of this research is to explore the possibilities for agency¹ and social change in the reconceptualisation of subjectivity² both in relation to knowledge generation and the relationship between individuals and society. Theoretically this research is located in the broad field of postmodern feminism, particularly in relation to the postmodern³ challenge to modernist views of subjectivity and metanarratives. The practice context for this research is the field of youth work.

The aims of this research are:

1. To explore the construction of subjectivity in relation to the influence of past experiences and dominant social discourses, and the relationship between these;
2. To explore the nature of people's conscious experience of their subjectivity;
3. To explore the impact of researcher subjectivity on the research process and findings;
4. To explore the possible relationship between subjectivity, agency and social change.

1.2 Background

This research arose from my professional practice experience as a social worker. In this section I briefly outline the major themes of my practice and then explore three practice insights - the separation between theory and practice; the separation between individual experiences and social structures and processes; and the separation between our past and

¹ I use the term agency to refer to a person's ability to take active and creative control over their lives, including the capacity for awareness and reflection and the ability to make choices based on these reflections which result in action (McNay, 2002).

² I use the term subjectivity here to refer to the unconscious and conscious thoughts and emotions of a person, including their sense of being a subject, their awareness of self and individuality, and their ways of

understanding themselves in relation to the world (Rosenau, 1993; Weedon, 1987).

³ In this thesis the term postmodernism will be taken to also encompass poststructuralist thought. While discernable differences exist between the two movements, some authors note that the terms postmodernism and poststructuralism have often been used interchangeably in the literature (Francis, 2002; Harvey, 1990) and Sim (2000) argues that postmodernism subsumes poststructuralism in general terms.

present life experiences. I also address the relevance of these insights for this thesis, in particular the possibilities for informing social change.

1.2.1 Practice Themes

Shortly after graduation I commenced work in a community based, medium to long-term accommodation service for very marginalised and high needs young people. Working in this organisation for over three years provided the initial idea for this research.

The majority of young people with whom I worked had long histories of abuse in their family of origin and often in subsequent living situations. At the time these young people came to live with us they appeared to be displaying the enormity of their childhood experiences in ways that were often damaging to themselves and others. Many had offended, sometimes seriously; all had been homeless for a number of years; most could not remember the last contact they had with their families or any other long-term supports; they were seldom at school or employed; they were often involved with opportunistic prostitution, drugs, alcohol and other substances; they often self-harmed; and on occasions were violent to others.⁴

Our work involved long hours of attempting to establish safe and trusting relationships where the young people could feel some sense of trust in us and some sense of permanency in the accommodation that we offered. Our hope was that they would feel able to process, with us, the enormity of their earlier experiences and the ways in which these informed their current actions and view of the world. We never condoned their violence or their destructive behaviour but we attempted to never reject them as people either.

When I referred back to my learning from university to inform my work with these young people, the radical social work perspective seemed most relevant given that so much of their lives had been influenced by broader social systems and conditions. I felt that the continuing marginalisation of these young people was greatly influenced by the nature of our society, and this was legitimated by blaming them for their perceived individual failures. I considered the marginalisation of young people to also be indicative

⁴ It is this group of highly marginalised young people that I refer to when, throughout this thesis, I speak of young people.

of the social processes of marginalising and oppressing many other people by virtue of their membership to certain social groups (e.g. Indigenous people, women, gay and lesbian people, etc.).

The most apparent and recurring theme in my practice related to the ways in which certain concepts, such as theory and practice, individuals and society, and past and present experiences, appeared to be artificially separated⁵. These separations appeared instrumental in reducing opportunities for social change and it seemed to me that a relationship of connectedness rather than of separation may hold some possibilities for meaningful social change. These separations, explored in more detail below, were important themes in the early stages of this research.

1.2.1.1 Separating Theory and Practice

During my practice I was confronted with the realisation that the theories I had learnt at university were not helpful in practice, resulting in my sense that there was a disconnection between theory and practice. These theories appeared alienated from the reality of practice and I began to wonder about the ways in which this separation hampered change in my work with individual young people and socially.

During this time my practice was based on an intuitive approach where I, and many of my colleagues, focused on what felt appropriate rather than incorporating well-developed theoretical analyses into our practice. Over time I learnt what worked and developed some general principles for understanding and working with young people.

1.2.1.2 Separating Individuals and Society

I approached my early social work practice from a radical/structural perspective involving a recognition of the ways in which people's individual lives are influenced by the social system. However, my experience suggested that the reality of attempting to connect individual experiences with social structures and processes was much more complex than I had perceived.

⁵ I was unaware of the interest in this area by feminism and postmodernism, having not been exposed to these perspectives in my undergraduate education.

For example, I was unable to find adequate explanations or discussions of the complexities in the relationship between marginalised young people and society; similarly, broader social issues that were impacting on young people's lives were individualised and seen as a result of individual failure or weakness (e.g. young people being unable to find secure housing and employment).

1.2.1.3 Separating Past and Present Experiences

Similarly, in my experience there was little recognition of the connection between young people's current behaviour and their past experiences. Young people were seen as either victims or perpetrators without examination of the ways in which past experiences may impact on their behaviour. It appeared to me that young people who had been abused often went on to abuse others and themselves. The ways in which these young people dealt with their experiences and emotions seemed important in terms of developing effective responses as workers.

Socially, this lack of recognition led to a sense of inconsistency and injustice for many young people. I remember one young person's comment as we approached the courthouse for her first appearance for a minor break and enter. She could not understand how it was that she had to go to court for breaking into a house and stealing 'ten bucks' and yet her parents could break every bone in her body, throw her out of a three-story window, rape and sexually assault her, make her eat her own faeces for breakfast - and yet they were never charged let alone ever having to appear before a court.⁶

1.2.2 Change

These three themes contributed to my belief that despite the best efforts of many youth workers, very little of substance ever seemed to change in the lives of the young people we were working with, nor did our actions appear to address the deeper issues leading to more and more young people coming through our service. This frustration partly reflected a naivety about the pace of change and my power to influence the lives of other

⁶ I am aware that the danger in the line of argument that I am pursuing is that it will be seen to be encouraging young people to not take responsibility for their actions because of the horrendous abuse they may have suffered. This, however, is not my point. All young people must be responsible for their actions. But so too must all adults. It appeared that society was condoning the differential treatment of some people over others.

people and society in general. Like other enthusiastic and optimistic new social work graduates, I was desperate to see visible and overt changes that would affirm me as a worker.

On a larger scale though, I began to question the system-supporting nature of these separations that I had identified in my practice. I questioned whether these separations served a political purpose in sustaining the present social system by hampering possibilities for social change. My thought process at the time was: if theories were developed in concert with the realities of practice and people's life experiences, surely our actions would be more likely to be effective; similarly, if the complex connections between individual experiences and the social system were evident and valued, would injustices caused by our social structure not be more susceptible to change?

My initial aim, therefore, in undertaking this research was to attempt to generate knowledge about young people and youth work practice in a way that was not characterised by these separations, in the hope that this knowledge might increase opportunities for change to the position of marginalised young people in society.

1.3 Reconceptualisations in the Thesis

The initial purpose of this thesis has undergone a significant reconceptualisation which has become a central aspect of the research findings. Initially influenced by modernist feminist perspectives, this research now exists within the broader context of the feminist/postmodern challenge to knowledge paradigms and the transitional nature of thought⁷ (Flax, 1990a, 1990b, 1993a). The primary challenge to my initial conceptualisation in the research has been in relation to notions of truth and the recognition of the universalising tendencies of metanarratives.

Over the course of this research the tension between universalist and relativist approaches has created difficulties in theorising, or as Flax (1990a) states, "how to understand and constitute self, gender, knowledge, social relations, and cultural change without resorting to linear, teleological, hierarchical, holistic, or binary ways of thinking

⁷ However, it is important to note, as I argue in chapter four (section 4.3.4), that modernist feminist perspectives were important precursors to postmodernism.

or being” (pp. 14-15). This tension disrupts the processes of domination implicit in Enlightenment thought by exposing differences and discontinuities (Flax, 1990a; Fraser & Nicholson, 1990; Marshall, 1994).

These issues regarding the transitory nature of theorising are most relevant in that I experienced them as a form of disruption throughout my research. Interestingly, these issues did not emerge through my engagement with the literature but rather in my encounters with research participants. While my initial approach to this research challenged positivist approaches to knowledge generation, it remained firmly embedded in modernist discourses, particularly in relation to concepts such as truth and subjectivity. However, throughout the research the complexities in these concepts lead to a reconceptualisation of the overall approach and purpose to the research. As a result, I returned to the literature, specifically to postmodern and postmodern feminist sources, to explore my experiences and further my arguments. This reconceptualisation is detailed here and is referred to again in chapter seven (section 7.6.2) in relation to the analysis of the research and the ways in which the need for this reconceptualisation emerged; and in chapter eleven (section 11.2) where I discuss the overall conclusions from the research in relation to this and other findings.

I initially suggested that knowledge development is a political process where knowledge produced may be either system-supporting or system-challenging. It has been argued that the way in which knowledge is produced influences the nature of the knowledge produced (Fay,1975). Therefore my aim was to develop a system-challenging research methodology in the hope that it would generate a ‘different’ form of knowledge that may facilitate change in some form. I approached my work with research participants with the aim of seeking a ‘truer’ knowledge by utilising a research process that attempted to incorporate subjective aspects of the research in the hope of reversing the system-supporting nature of positivist research.

In this original conceptualisation I considered truth to be two-dimensional – the truth that people presented in their public selves which I saw as often masking a deeper level of truth in their private and more emotional selves. I interpreted the latter form of truth as ‘truer’ and therefore more desirable for creating useful and change oriented

knowledge. I attempted to create a methodology that would facilitate access to this deeper level of truth.

However, what occurred during my encounters with research participants highlighted the simplistic nature of this approach in that it became clear that there were many different aspects to the concept of truth and my initial approach was unable to account for the complexities that I was experiencing. The contradictions and inconsistencies that continually appeared throughout my interactions with research participants resulted in my questioning how truth is interpreted and my approach to the role of research in establishing the 'truth'. While my initial impulse was to resist these challenges and proceed with my original task, they became such a constant feature of my work that I felt compelled to explore them.

As a result of this reconceptualisation, the analysis of the findings from this research has focused on the centrality of the concept of subjectivity and the relationship between subjectivity, agency and change. For example, rather than focus on the relationship between individuals and society, I have reconceptualised this to focus on the construction of subjectivity and the influence of past experiences and dominant social discourses. Similarly, rather than explore the relationship between theory and practice, I have sought to examine the role of subjectivity in research and the possibilities for revealing subversive forms of knowledge through a focus both on researcher and research participant subjectivity.

The appearance of these issues in my research is undoubtedly not coincidence. Located within the broader field of social theory and reflective of the influence of postmodern and postmodern feminist thought, the very nature of subjectivity and theorising are now central themes of this reconceptualised research.

1.4 Methodology

The methodology developed for this thesis employs a form of feminist personal narrative that was used with four young people and five youth workers. The methodological process involved six stages:

1. Developing relationships.
2. Telling of personal/professional stories.
3. Creative processes for expressing stories.
4. Analysis of social structures, systems and processes.
5. Social change possibilities.
6. Reflection on the research process and participation.

Feminist personal narrative as a methodological approach values the subjective, particularly in terms of the relationship between individuals and society, the role of the researcher and the importance of the research processes, in addition to change possibilities that may emerge as a consequence of the research processes (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Atkinson, 1997; Burgos, 1989; Evans, 1993; Harrison & Lyon, 1993; Middleton, 1993; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Ribbens, 1993; Richardson, 1990; Riessman, 1993; Stanley, 1992, 1993b).

A consistent aspect of this research is the focus on my own personal and intellectual auto/biography (Stanley, 1990; 1993a; 1993b). I have adopted Stanley's term 'intellectual auto/biography' and applied and extended it as I have attempted to locate myself (subjectively) in all aspects of the research. I have included my observations and reflections on the research process as valuable aspects of the data collected, and I have also included parts of my own story as a researcher, social worker, and person more generally, where this has seemed relevant and appropriate. In this research the role of the researcher is regarded as critical and, rather than being seen as an unwanted influence, researcher history, emotions and reflections are considered a useful part of the research process. As Flax (1990a) suggests, I have not been a "neutral participant or a disinterested facilitator" (p. 3) of the issues I have been concerned with in this research.

1.5 Overview of the Thesis

Both modernist and postmodernist literature have relevance for this research and the four literature review chapters reflect the shift in orientation of this research from (primarily) modernist feminist approaches to (primarily) postmodern feminist approaches. These chapters set the scene for the arguments and conclusions developed in the later chapters of the thesis.

Chapter two is the first of these chapters and explores the perspectives within modernist feminism which have relevance for this research. The chapter commences with an exploration of liberal feminism and positivist approaches to research, specifically presenting this perspective as a system-supporting one to which other forms of modernist feminism have responded. The chapter proceeds to a discussion of both socialist feminism and third world feminism and the associated research approach of standpoint epistemology. In line with the early modernist nature of this research, standpoint epistemology was instrumental in the development of the methodological approach.

Chapter three outlines postmodern feminist perspectives and begins with a brief discussion of postmodernism, followed by an examination of the impacts of postmodernism on feminism. Postmodern feminist perspectives on the relationship between the feminist agenda for political action and the postmodern critique of universalising are a major focus of this chapter.

Chapters four and five address the issue of subjectivity. Chapter four presents modernist views of subjectivity including important precursors to postmodernism such as Marxism, Freud, structuralism and feminism. Chapter five presents postmodern perspectives on subjectivity and focuses again on postmodern feminist views, this time with particular attention to the issue of agency in the context of postmodernism's decentering of the subject.

The following two chapters focus on the research method. In chapter six the methodological approach of this research, feminist personal narrative, is outlined. This approach is discussed and specific attention is given to the importance of the role of the researcher, the relationship between individuals and society, and possibilities for social change. This chapter also details the narrative approach to the analysis and the systematic stages involved. Importantly, the approach to analysis focuses on the research process in addition to the content generated in my interactions with research participants. A discussion of the issues of validity and interpretation in subjective research also appear in this chapter. Chapter seven reviews the research methodology including issues such as the research setting, the role of the researcher, the stages of the research process and the process of analysis.

Chapter eight is the first of three chapters to present the findings from the research. This chapter focuses on my subjective account of the research and pays attention to the importance of researcher subjectivity, the role and influence of the researcher throughout the research process, and the nature of the relationships between researcher and research participants. Examples from the transcripts of the research are interspersed throughout this chapter.

The findings from the research in relation to the construction of subjectivity are detailed in chapter nine. Both past experiences and dominant social discourses are explored for their influence in research participants' subjective understandings of their own lives and society in general. Chapter ten presents research findings in relation to the centrality of self as it was expressed throughout the research. Particular attention is given to the relationship I perceived between research participants and their conscious relationship with their subjectivity. Both chapters nine and ten include examples from the research transcripts.

The conclusion to this thesis is presented in chapter eleven where the overall arguments from the research are detailed and located in the broader field of postmodern feminist literature. A summary of the research is provided in addition to suggestions for future research arising from this thesis.

CHAPTER TWO

MODERNISM AND FEMINISM

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present those modernist feminist perspectives that have relevance for this research. In general, modernist feminist perspectives are united in their agreement about the oppression of women and the necessity of social change (Barrett & Phillips, 1992; Tong, 1989, 1998; Wearing, 1996; Zalewski, 2000). However, there are many differences among these perspectives specifically relating to the cause of women's oppression and the nature of the changes required in society. Modernist feminisms are labelled according to the specific views of each perspective, thus helping to mark "the range of different approaches, perspectives, and frameworks a variety of feminists have used to shape both their explanations for women's oppression and their proposed solutions for its elimination" (Tong, 1998, pp. 1-2).

Given the diversity within feminism, it is not possible to talk about feminist theory as a unified body of knowledge. As Flax (1990a) states:

In fact feminist theory is not even a discipline, if this is defined as a delimited area of intellectual discourse in which a general consensus exists among its practitioners as to subject matter, appropriate methodology, and desirable outcomes. There is a lively controversy among persons who identify themselves as feminist theorists on each of these components. (p. 20)

Liberal feminism is an important perspective within modernist feminist perspectives because a great deal of contemporary feminist theory defines itself in reaction to it (Tong, 1989, 1998). Other perspectives within feminism have arisen, in part, through an attempt to address the deficiencies in liberal feminism. In the first section of this chapter the liberal feminist perspective is explored and critiqued. In the following section, positivism, as the dominant liberal epistemology, is outlined and the connections between liberal feminism and positivism are discussed through an exploration of feminist empiricism. The purpose of these sections is to highlight the system-supporting nature of liberal feminism and positivist research methodologies, giving rise to system-challenging perspectives within feminism.

Given the transitional nature of my theorising, modernist feminist perspectives are important, having informed the initial conceptualisation of this research including attention to the political nature of knowledge and theory development. In addition, it is argued that feminist theory generally has acted as an important precursor to postmodernism¹. Both socialist and third world feminisms focus on the system-challenging potential of feminist theory and are therefore more consistent with the central concerns of this research. Both perspectives are explored in this chapter in addition to the associated epistemological perspectives of standpoint epistemology. Standpoint epistemology is relevant to both socialist and third world feminism and is central in the development of the methodology for this research. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the specific ways in which socialist and third world feminism have informed this research.

2.2 Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism is equated with ‘mainstream’ feminism (Eisenstein, 1981), the most dominant and public face of feminism in the western world. Liberal feminism exists within the overall philosophical position of liberalism and, as with some other feminisms (Marxist, socialist, psychoanalytic, existential, for example), the position of women has been added to a larger body of philosophical knowledge which previously ignored the question of women. As Tapper (1986) argues:

Liberal feminism, from its origins in the late eighteenth century, has been based on two principles: that the liberal conception of the individual ought to be extended to include women, and that women ought to be accepted on equal terms with men in the public realm. The political effect of understanding the oppression of women in liberal terms is to ask for reforms within the status quo. (p. 37)

Given the emphasis placed on social change within modernist feminisms, many perspectives seek a transformation of existing social structures and processes, rather than a modification to the social system (Tong, 1989, 1998). The exception to this is the liberal feminist perspective which does not advocate fundamental change to society. Liberal feminism holds an important position in contemporary feminist debates because of this position (Tong, 1989, 1998). It is in relation to the notion of difference and the

¹ Refer to chapter four, section 4.3.4.

nature of social change that the system supporting nature of liberal feminism is most evident.

2.2.1 Difference

The liberal feminist focus on rationality has led to a dismissal of biological differences between the sexes. Instead it is suggested that people should be treated as “abstract individuals of no determinate age, race, sex, or economic class” (Jaggar, 1983a, p. 26). Liberal feminism “denies differences between genders, ignores the body and promotes a fundamentally male reality” (Wearing, 1996, p. 11).

Liberal feminism minimises the idea of difference, not only in terms of biological determinants, but also as a basic concept in social life. The emphasis is on de-politicising any differences between the sexes, rather than focusing on the ways in which inequality is based on the social valuing of these differences (Jaggar, 1983a; Tapper, 1986). While gender differences are recognised and considered unacceptable, the response to this is to suggest an opening up of opportunities for women to participate in ways equal to men hence eliminating any existing gender differences (Wearing, 1996; Tong, 1998; Elshtain, 1982; Tapper, 1986). The implication in liberal feminism is that the existing differences between men and women are a feature of a society where men have been allowed to realise their true natures and women have not. Therefore if women are allowed equal participation to men, these gender differences will disappear and women will become the same as men (Wearing, 1996; Tong, 1998).

There are two concerns with this position as reflected in feminist critiques of the liberal feminist position on difference. Firstly, there is little recognition of the biological differences that do exist between the sexes and those that have evolved over time through the social construction of the sexes. Radical feminism in particular suggests that many of these qualities are positive and desirable characteristics for the future of our society (Wearing, 1996).

Secondly, there is a lack of recognition of differences other than gender and their impact on women and men’s lives (Tong, 1989, 1998). Oppression on the basis of race, class and other social dimensions are not explored to any depth.

2.2.2 Social Change

In terms of change, the essence of the liberal feminist position is that although the oppression of women is undesirable, this is not a primary feature of our social system and therefore does not require a significant transformation of society. Liberal feminists argue that the state has played a role in the subordination of women; however, it appears that this has been more through oversight or accident, rather than deliberate intention. As in liberalism generally, the state is seen as neutral, as an arbiter, “in principle ‘above the battle’ but able to step in to redress injustice” (Franzway, Court & Connell, 1989, p. 14).

As Franzway et al. continue to argue:

Liberal feminism acknowledges that the state is not neutral in its treatment of women. It sees the state, in effect, as having been captured by men. It treats sexism and patriarchy as a case of imperfect citizenship, requiring redress. (p. 14)

This is a ‘reform not revolution’ position; it does not aim to change basic social structures that gave rise to the oppression of women in the first place (Jaggar, 1983a; Tapper, 1986; Tong, 1989, 1998; Wearing, 1996). Necessary changes can be accommodated within the existing social system. Liberal feminists believe that by seizing opportunities to develop and implement policies that will remove discrimination directed to women and open up the state to women’s participation, the potential for the state to be equally neutral to women as well as men will be realised and women’s oppression will be no longer. As Tong (1989) suggests:

What liberal feminists wish to do is free women from oppressive gender roles - that is, from those roles that have been used as excuses or justifications for giving women a lesser place, or no place at all, in the academy, the forum, and the marketplace. (p. 28)

Other feminist perspectives are critical of liberal feminism because the level of analysis in this position does not take into account deeper structural issues and their importance in achieving change. Radical feminists suggest that it is naive to believe that patriarchy could be reformed rather than transformed given that this social system is characterised by power, dominance, hierarchy and competition (Tong, 1998). For example, Tapper (1986) argues that liberal feminism:

... does not deal with the patriarchal values and assumptions that are deeply embedded in the basic forms of social relations, cultural traditions, political organisations and structures of consciousness.... It leads to thinking of our situation as a personal and not a political issue and to thinking that if women

have problems then each individually can solve them, once the legal reforms are made, that is, that it is an individual's dilemma rather than a social problem. (p. 46)

It has been suggested that the danger inherent in the liberal feminist position is that modifications to the existing social system, through means such as policy formation, run the risk of further entrenching patterns known to be oppressive. The result of this is that not only men operate on principles considered presently to be less than desirable, but that women internalise these too (Elshtain, 1982; Tapper, 1986; Tong, 1998; Wearing, 1996). The underlying objective appears to be to make women more like men (Tapper, 1986), to play the game by men's rules and to take on male traits - the very same game and the very same traits considered within all parts of modernist feminism to be responsible for generations of oppression and subordination of women.

Liberal feminism is an explicitly system supporting feminist position, advocating for the maintenance of the status quo with only minor modifications. The liberal feminist position in relation to difference suggests that men and women will become equal within the existing social structure and therefore that social change is only necessary to remove the barriers to this process. It has been suggested by other feminisms that more fundamental social change is required to the position of women and this is unlikely to be achieved successfully within the liberal feminist agenda.

Consistent with a belief in the value of the existing social order, liberal feminism reflects a commitment to positivism as the dominant epistemology, including a belief in an absolute, knowable truth which is discernable through scientific research. The adherence to positivism is a further way in which this perspective illustrates its system-supporting nature. Positivist epistemology and the liberal feminist methodological approach of feminist empiricism are explored in the following section.

2.3 Knowledge Generation in Liberalism/Liberal Feminism

Positivism has dominated knowledge development in Western society for centuries (Jaggar & Bordo, 1989; Nielsen, 1990). Since the time of the early Greek philosophers the dominance of pure logic and reason has characterised the positivist approach to knowledge generation (Nielsen, 1990). Within positivism is a belief in an objective,

knowable truth as distinct from the relativist position which asserts that knowledge is limited by culture, history and perspective (Nielsen, 1990). The tension between objectivism and relativism has become increasingly evident as feminism, postmodernism and other paradigms continue to challenge traditional scientific views and perspectives on knowledge development.

Challenges to the dominance of positivism have been possible due to the recognition that traditional forms of knowledge generation reflect relations of domination in Western society. As Hubbard (1990) argues:

It is a fact of practical politics that the ruling group or class not only generates the reigning ideology but also controls the means that make this ideology the dominant or even exclusive “truth.” (p. 17)

These challenges have constituted a ‘postempirical crisis’ in knowledge development with a diversity of critical theorists, hermeneutic, feminist and postmodern scholars actively challenging positivism and developing alternative approaches to knowledge generation.

2.3.1 Feminism and Positivism: A Critique

The central claim in the feminist critique of positivism is that knowledge development is a political process that has served a purpose in sustaining the status quo. This is evident in Hubbard’s (1990) assertion that:

We need to understand that science is an abstraction from what scientists observe – necessarily a selective rendering of nature. And we need to emphasise that the abstractions and selections are made by people who live in a specific time and place and embody specific roles and interests. Although science is consensual, the imagination and thinking of scientists – that special group of people that share in the consensus – are no freer of contextual constraints than are those of other people. As long as the overwhelming majority of scientists are men who are rooted in the ruling class, socially or intellectually (or both), science will supply the “objective” supports and technical innovations needed to sustain patriarchal, ruling-class power. (p. 18)

Many feminists have consistently critiqued a number of key issues within positivism and many elements of this critique are also shared by postmodernists. Feminist theory has provided much of the groundwork for the postmodern critique of modernist epistemologies.

1. **Absolute Truth:** Many feminists (Grosz, 1988; Gunew, 1990; Harding, 1987, 1986; Hekman, 1987; Hubbard, 1990; Nielsen, 1990) have challenged positivist ideas about truth. The notion of “one truth, one method, one knowledge, one mode of reason, one form of subject” has been seriously questioned by feminists with the belief that it is only by “wresting the concept of the one from its exclusive identification with the norms of masculinity [that] feminists [can] claim the right to speak, think and act *otherwise*” (Grosz, 1988, p. 99). Instead it is claimed that truth is measured only by the extent to which stories and facts reflect other people’s experiences and the extent to which they can be applied and used in real life (Hubbard, 1990).

2. **Knowledge and Gender:** The realisation that knowledge development in the Western world was originated and has been developed by men is significant in the claim that positivism serves the interests of men (Hawkesworth, 1989). While science suggests that present forms of knowledge are human and universal, feminists argue that they are ‘male’ and in that sense exclude females (Gunew, 1990; Narayan, 1989; Strickland, 1994; Westkott, 1990). Feminists suggest that “products of thought bear the mark of their collective and individual creators, and the creators in turn have been distinctively marked as to gender, class, race, and culture” (Harding, 1986, p. 15). Women’s standpoint is significantly different given the different meanings attached to being female and the different experiences that women have in society (Lennon & Whitford, 1994). Women then, bring a different perspective to the knowledge generation process. Farganis (1989) suggests that “women who have come to recognise and accept feminist assumptions about the world will practice science differently in a world that legitimates those assumptions” (p. 207). Thus, women are seen to have an ‘epistemic advantage’ given women’s historical positioning in society (Farganis, 1989).

3. **Hierarchical Dualisms:** Feminisms are interested in the gendered nature of the dualisms inherent in positivism, particularly their hierarchical ordering (Grosz, 1988; Harding, 1986; Wilshire, 1989). Those characteristics most highly valued are considered male and those that are typically devalued are considered female (Hawkesworth, 1989; Hekman, 1987; Stanley, 1990). Traditional knowledge

ensures that the characteristics associated with being female are less valued than those associated with being male. In this way the perpetuation of these ways of knowing and thinking ensure the survival of women's oppression by continuing to associate women with less socially desirable characteristics (Grosz, 1988).

4. **Objectivity and Subjectivity:** Intrinsic to the practice of science is the notion of scientific objectivity. According to positivism, objective knowledge can only be obtained through renouncing the subjectivity of the researcher (Hekman, 1987; Westkott, 1990). Hekman states that the Enlightenment focus on "objectivity, its rejection of subjectivity even in the realm of morality, and Descartes' definition of the knowing subject as the basis of all knowledge combined to lend this dichotomy a particular importance" (p. 74). One of the highly significant aspects of this particular dichotomy is again its gendered nature. As Hekman states "subjects are always defined as male, objects as female" (p. 75). The feminist critique of Enlightenment thought highlights that this separation between objectivity and subjectivity has not been achieved in scientific inquiry. The exclusion of women and women's perspective suggests that traditional science has been marked by a masculine subjectivity (Lennon & Whitford, 1994). Lennon and Whitford have suggested that the 'subject' is implicated in all knowledge production and that "it is not simply due to bad practice that masculine subjects have allowed their subjectivity to imprint on their product. Such imprinting of subjectivity is inevitable" (p. 2).
5. **Reason and Emotion:** The focus on reason and rationality to the exclusion of emotion and intuition is a feature of positivism and is another of feminism's central criticisms of this approach to knowledge development. Jaggar (1989) notes that in "the western philosophical tradition, emotions usually have been considered as potentially or actually subversive of knowledge" (p. 145). Within positivism, emotions are considered to be irrational urges or passions and in this sense are not considered to be stable and definable, hence the claim that knowledge could only be gained through methods that ensured that the emotions of scientists were controlled (Jaggar, 1989). Importantly, this myth of dispassionate enquiry serves a central ideological function in society (Jaggar, 1989). Emotion is primarily associated with some subordinate groups in society

(women, people of colour) while reason is associated with the dominant group of white males. By ensuring that the claims of those subordinate groups of people are dismissed on the basis that they are subjective, emotional and irrational, the claims of the dominant groups are supported and legitimated (Jaggar, 1989). Jaggar suggests that this “ideal of the dispassionate investigator is a classist, racist, and especially masculinist myth” (p. 158).

6. **Knowledge as Political:** Feminists suggest that politics intersects with epistemology (Alcoff & Potter, 1993). Farganis (1989) states that knowledge reflects certain interests and in this sense is grounded in politics serving an essentially political purpose, such as legitimating attitudes and behaviours towards different social groups. This perspective sees knowledge as discourse and recognises that discourses are always political (Farganis, 1989) and that “legitimation of knowledge-claims is intimately tied to networks of domination and exclusion (Lennon & Whitford, 1994, p. 1). Berman (1989) states that science is an expression of a society’s ideology and Hubbard (1990) argues that science has developed as an adjunct to capitalism and is unquestioningly supportive of this form of social organisation. If therefore, knowledge reflects social conditions and interests, it is appropriate to explore “the rules that determine if something is true or false and the conditions under which one set of rules rather than another prevails” (Farganis, p. 210). It is in this area that positivism fails to reflect on its epistemological foundations and the social system and structure of which it is a part (Farganis, 1989). Science is seen to be a “political ideology of domination” (Farganis, p. 214).

This feminist critique highlights the inadequacies of the positivist epistemological position in terms of its capacity to produce system-challenging knowledge. This critique also indicates some important issues to be incorporated within a methodological approach which attempts to be system-challenging.

Feminisms have responded to these concerns within positivism by constructing alternative epistemological perspectives including feminist empiricism, standpoint theory and postmodern feminist epistemologies. The following section will explore feminist

empiricism; section 2.6 in this chapter looks at standpoint theory; and section 3.5 in the following chapter explores postmodern feminist approaches to epistemology.

2.3.2 Feminist Empiricism

Feminist empiricism exists within the context of positivist approaches to knowledge generation and, it is argued here, maintains the system-supporting nature of positivist knowledge development. For example, Harding (1986) points out that, “feminist empiricism argues that sexism and androcentrism are social biases correctable by stricter adherence to the existing methodological norms of scientific inquiry” (p. 24).

The primary assertion of feminist empiricists is that objective knowledge is possible but has not been achieved because of the effects of sexism and this has resulted in the incorrect use of empirical methods (Jansen, 1990). It is this sexism and androcentrism that has resulted in ‘bad science’ and is responsible for the false claims made in traditional knowledge (Harding, 1989). Harding suggests that these biases are evident in all stages of the research process from the choice of research problem to the design of the research, collection and analysis of information.

Feminist empiricists believe that sexism in research can be eliminated in scientific inquiry and that this is essential for objective knowledge to be achieved (Hawkesworth, 1989). In fact, this bias in research is seen to be a result of “the distorting lenses of particular observers” (Hawkesworth, p. 535) and in this sense the objectivity of the researcher, which is still considered critical by these feminists, is compromised. Hawkesworth goes on to say:

From this view, the appropriate method for apprehending the truth about the world involves a process of systematic observation in which the subjectivity of the observer is controlled by rigid adherence to neutral procedures designed to produce identical measurements of the real properties of objects. (p. 535)

Harding (1992) extends this point:

By identifying and eliminating masculine bias through more rigorous adherence to scientific methods, we can get an objective, de-gendered (and in that sense, value-free) picture of nature and social life. Feminist inquiry represents not a substitution of one gender loyalty for the other - one subjectivism for another - but the transcendence of gender which thereby increases objectivity. (p. 343)

However, Harding (1986, 1989, 1992) suggests that this approach actually subverts empiricism in three ways. First, empiricists suggest that the subjectivity or identity of the observer should be irrelevant to the research results. However feminists argue that women are more likely to produce unbiased research given the gender bias in traditional empiricism (Harding, 1992). Secondly, feminists have suggested that the selection of research areas reflects androcentrism, yet empiricists state that its methodological norms do not relate to the process of identifying and defining research (Harding, 1992). Thirdly, “our empiricist criticisms of ‘bad science’ in fact subvert the very understandings of science they are meant to reinforce” (Harding, 1992, p. 344).

This position is largely a reformist approach, similar to liberal feminism’s approach to theory, in that it does not question the viability of empiricism generally (Jansen, 1990). Harding (1989) states that “feminist empiricism leaves intact empiricist understandings of the principles of scientific inquiry that are *de rigueur* for most practising natural and social scientists. It appears to challenge only the incomplete way empiricism has been practised, not the norms of empiricism themselves” (p. 191).

2.4 Socialist Feminism

Socialist and Marxist feminisms share a focus on class as a distinguishing category in the oppression of women. However, implicit in Marxist feminism is the notion that gender is secondary to class and the class state is the origin and ultimate source of women’s oppression (McIntosh, 1978). Marxist feminists have been criticised for over-simplifying the forces that act to oppress women and minimising the other dimensions (such as heterosexism, racism, etc.) that impact on many women’s lives (Tong, 1989). Socialist feminism arose from disillusioned Marxist feminists who recognised the limitations of a Marxist perspective to “comprehend the bases, structure, dynamic, and detail of women’s oppression” (Young, 1990, p. 21). Socialist feminists have combined this approach with both radical and psychoanalytic feminism (Tong, 1989; Wearing, 1996; Young, 1990).

Socialist feminism differs from Marxist feminism in that it is more concerned with the interactions between patriarchy and capitalism and considers the importance to be in the relationship between the two. Socialist feminists do not agree with Marxist feminists that

class is the central category, but rather that the way that class and gender relate is of significance (Tong, 1989).

In general terms, Ehrenreich (1975) has argued that socialist feminism is characterised by the following:

1. A 'totalistic' understanding which suggests that transformation is required on a number of levels throughout society, including both personal and political elements.
2. Socialist feminism stresses subjective elements in the change process where consciousness raising is central.
3. Socialist feminism rejects 'stageism' suggesting that change does not need to occur in a linear or predetermined way.
4. Socialist feminism recognises the critical importance of women in all aspects of social transformation.

According to Tong (1989) there are two approaches that have been developed under the banner of socialist feminism as a way of addressing the inadequacies in Marxist, radical and psychoanalytic feminisms. Dual systems theory is the most dominant approach in socialist feminist thought. The emphasis here is on the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy where both are seen as distinct and where the intersection between the two becomes the most obvious point of oppression for women. Approaching an understanding of the position of women from this perspective entails an analysis of capitalism and patriarchy in terms of their separateness and also the dialectical relationship between them (Abramovitz, 1988; Diaz, 1988; Eisenstein, 1977; Tong, 1989; Young, 1990).

As Young (1990) explains:

Stated briefly.... the dual systems theory says that women's oppression arises from two distinct and relatively autonomous systems. The system of male domination, most often called 'patriarchy', produces the specific gender oppression of women; the system of the mode of production and class relations produces the class oppression and work alienation of most women. Patriarchy 'intersects' with the system of the mode of production - in our case, capitalism - to produce the concrete phenomena of women's oppression in society. (p. 21)

Dual systems theory became the socialist feminist response to the difficulties of attempting to integrate the relevant aspects of Marxist theory and radical feminist theory (Young, 1990). The limitations of both these theories are evident to socialist feminists who argue that both capitalism and patriarchy need to be given an equal theoretical footing (Abramovitz, 1988). As Abramovitz argues:

Socialist feminism defines patriarchy as an autonomous system of social relations but insists on its inseparability from capitalism. The societal divisions by gender, class, and race thus reflect a synthesis of patriarchy and capitalism and are not determined primarily by one or the other alone. So for example, socialist feminists suggest that capitalist production is shaped by the forces of male dominance and that male dominance is organised by capitalist class relations. (p. 25)

While all perspectives within dual systems theory would agree that male domination exists separately and independently of the relations of production (Young, 1990), it should also be noted that there is not one dual systems theory, but rather this term refers to a general approach within socialist feminism. As Young states, “those who subscribe to a dual systems approach to understanding women’s oppression differ significantly in the categories they use and in their particular formulations of the dual systems account” (pp. 23-24).

Several writers have produced significant work in this area that reflects both its importance and also its diversity. Abramovitz’s (1988) concept of the family ethic is based on a socialist feminist analysis that relies on the dual systems theory. Her concern is to understand how patriarchy and capitalism combine to ‘regulate the lives of women’ and she attempts this by applying the concept of the family ethic to the history of women’s experiences in welfare. Abramovitz argues that capitalism and patriarchy rely for their survival on the institution of the family:

Indeed, families absorb the cost and responsibility for bearing and socialising the next generation, for managing consumption and other household matters, for organising sexual relations, for providing care to the aged, sick, and young who cannot work, and for producing income to meet all these needs. (p. 34)

In order to ensure the continuation of the family and therefore capitalism and patriarchy, women must take on a primary domestic role and be subordinate to their male partner. If the state could not rely on women occupying this position it would pose a formidable threat. The value of this for capitalism is to ensure free labour for domestic and child-

rearing purposes as well as a cheap surplus of labour when needed. For patriarchy, its value is to keep women in subordinate social and economic positions in relation to men (Abramovitz, 1988).

There is an emphasis on the gendered division of labour in this perspective. The separation of the sexes into private and public spheres has entrenched women's position within the home and family. Recognition of the sphere of reproduction in addition to production is stressed here. For women, this means that the capitalist, patriarchal society has constructed a situation where women are confined to one sphere if they are to successfully fulfil the social expectations associated with that role. In turn, this guarantees the survival of the social system.

Eisenstein (1977) has brought together radical and Marxist feminism as a form of socialist feminism that stresses the mutual dependence of capitalism and patriarchy. The term capitalist patriarchy is used to describe this interrelationship (Eisenstein, 1977). As Wearing (1996) notes in relation to Eisenstein's work:

While stressing the interdependence of capitalism and patriarchy, Eisenstein gave primacy to patriarchy and considered that the economic mode adapts to it in different historical periods. While economic systems change, patriarchy has been continuous, women being subordinated under each mode of production. (p. 20)

In terms of the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, Eisenstein (1977) stresses that this "is not a mere adding together of these two theories of power. It is rather a real mix of the interrelationships between capitalism and patriarchy as expressed through the sexual division of labour" (p. 3).

In contrast to the dual systems approach, unified-systems theory attempts to explain women's oppression through one conceptual lens thereby uniting all other feminist views and in this sense it "attempts to analyse capitalism and patriarchy together through the use of one concept" (Tong, 1989, p. 175). The suggestion here is that capitalism and patriarchy are not separate but are in fact, one and the same. Tong states that, "the emphasis of socialist feminism is on unity and integration, both in the sense of integrating all aspects of women's lives and in the sense of producing a unified feminist theory" (p. 7). The work of both Young (1990) and Jaggar (1983b) has been significant here.

Young (1990) initially advocated a dual systems theory approach in her work and later came to critique this position, developing a unified theory. She asserted that feminism would benefit from a socialist feminist theory that incorporated gender differentiation into the central aspects of its analysis of capitalist society. Young's notion of a united theory centred on the concept of the gendered division of labour and she employs this notion to unite Marxist, radical and psychoanalytic feminism (Tong, 1989). She was particularly concerned that the dual systems approach legitimated women's concerns being segregated into feminism, thereby allowing socialism to leave these issues fundamentally unaddressed (Young, 1990).

Jaggar (1983b) also attempts to develop a unified systems theory based around the core concept of alienation. The suggestion is that the concept of alienation has the potential to provide a theoretical framework capable of incorporating the insights of Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, and even liberal, feminism (Tong, 1989). Jaggar discusses the ways in which a woman's alienation is gender specific and relates to her alienation from herself and her wholeness as a person. In relation to Jaggar's position, Tong states:

In the same way that a wage worker is alienated, or separated, from the product(s) upon which he works, a woman is alienated from the product upon which she works: her body. (p. 187)

By drawing together the structural dimensions of capitalism and patriarchy, socialist feminism has captured some measure of the complexities facing women in industrial capitalist societies (Wearing, 1996). While socialist feminist theory has an appreciation of the importance of concerns raised by third world women, variables other than gender and class (such as race) remain primarily external to this analysis (Wearing, 1996). Socialist feminist theory does not appear able to incorporate the concerns of all women despite attempts to construct an overarching theory to explain women's oppression.

2.5 Third World Feminism²

² This term has been adopted from Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres in their book *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. While acknowledging the difficulties inherent in this term, the authors define the term 'third world women' as referring to "the colonised, neocolonised or decolonised countries whose economic and political structures have been deformed within the colonial process, and to black, Asian, Latino, and indigenous peoples in North America, Europe, and Australia" (ix). Thus it is not only applicable to geographical location but also to sociohistorical positioning (Mohanty, 1991). Included in this terminology then, are the other frequently used terms of black feminist writers (Collins, 1986, 1991) and feminists of colour (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1982) which will also be used throughout this section.

When I was in third grade I wanted to be president. I can still remember the stricken look on my teacher's face when I announced it in class. By the time I was in fourth grade I had decided to be the president's wife instead. It never occurred to me that I could be neither because I was Black. (Wallace, 1982, p. 5)

Writings from women of colour have produced a substantial challenge to white feminists, claiming the focus solely on gender is itself racist (Collins, 1986, 1991; hooks, 1982, 1990a, 1995; Hurtado, 1989; Johnson-Odin, 1991; Mohanty, 1991; Smith, 1982; Zinn, Cannon, Higginbotham & Dill, 1986). As Russo (1991) has stated, much of the recent development of third world feminism has been in reaction to the limitations of feminism generally:

Women of colour have challenged white feminists to deal with racism and classism, arguing that if feminism is about the empowerment of all women's lives, change is needed within the women's movement itself. (pp.298-299)

Smith (1982) clearly argues that racism is a feminist issue both because of feminism's definition and because of the effect that racism has on white women too. The failure to recognise this has ensured feminist theory is both incomplete and incorrect (Zinn et al., 1986). As Smith argues:

Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free *all* women: women of colour, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women - as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandisement. You have to comprehend how racism distorts and lessens your own lives as white women - that racism affects your chances for survival, too, and that it is very definitely your issue. (p. 49)

What was suggested as universally applicable to women has been exposed as relevant only, or mostly, to white, middle-class, heterosexual, women (Collins, 1991). hooks (1982) suggests that feminism's dream of a true 'sisterhood' has never been realised. Zinn et al. (1986) recognise that this view of universal womanhood was promoted to stress the shared aspects of women's experience thereby passing over the differences in women's lives. However, as a result, the whole notion of feminism itself has been challenged by many third world women (Collins, 1986, 1991; hooks, 1990a; Hurtado, 1989; Johnson-Odin, 1991; Lorde, 1982a; Mohanty, 1991; Zinn et al., 1986). For example, Mohanty states:

Feminist movements have been challenged on the grounds of cultural imperialism, and of short-sightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle-class, white experience, and in terms of internal racism, classism, and homophobia. All of these factors, as well as the falsely homogenous

representation of the movement by the media, have led to a real suspicion of “feminism” as a productive ground for struggle. (p. 7)

bell hooks (1990a) has made some significant contributions in relation to feminism’s assumption about the shared experiences of women and suggests that feminists have traditionally seen gender as the critical social category and implied that all other categories were secondary to it or offshoots from it. The conclusion of such feminists then, has been that resisting patriarchy is a more legitimate form of social action than resisting racism or other forces of oppression. She states that “to understand domination, we must understand that our capacity as women and men to be either dominated or dominating is a point of connection” (p. 186). This also implies that each woman must confront her own racism that has been internalised through living in this racist society (hooks, 1982). hooks suggests that the difficulty in white and black women coming together relates to a particular view of power and the purpose of the women’s movement:

Women’s liberationists, white and black, will always be at odds with one another as long as our idea of liberation is based on having the power white men have. For that power denies unity, denies common connections, and is inherently divisive. It is woman’s acceptance of divisiveness as a natural order that has caused black and white women to cling religiously to the belief that bonding across racial boundaries is impossible, to passively accept the notion that the distances that separate women are immutable. (p. 156)

According to Zinn et al. (1986) a brief exploration of the consideration of race and class issues within feminist thought has illustrated three common themes. Firstly, race and class are seen as secondary issues to universal female oppression. Secondly, race, class and gender inequalities are seen to create different experiences for women, but the focus remains on gender with race and class issues not examined in any detail. Thirdly, attention is given to the descriptive aspects of the lives of women who are oppressed through race and class but again very little attention is given to developing a deeper analysis of these issues. Zinn et al. state that all of these inadequacies “create an illusion of comprehensiveness and thereby stifle the development of scholarship about women of colour” (p. 297). Zinn et al. also agree with many other black feminists that white middle-class women’s analysis of oppression will also be inadequate because race and class are significant features of their lives also.

Dill (1983) questions the feminist notion of sisterhood, suggesting that many black women have felt excluded and rejected rather than involved and supported. Similarly, many black women have come to believe that feminism exists for white middle class women given that many of feminism's claims are at odds with the experiences of black women (Dill, 1983). She suggests, for example, that the feminist focus on labour force participation is inapplicable to black women who have higher rates of participation than white women and "many would have readily accepted what they saw as the 'luxury' of being a housewife" (p. 133).

Lorde (1982b) suggests that feminists' inability to deal with difference has led to a weakening of the feminist perspective generally. She states that women have been taught to "either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change" (p. 99).

Johnson-Odin (1991) makes an interesting distinction between feminism as a philosophy and what she terms as 'the shallow notion of women's rights' by suggesting that feminists must not only be concerned with women's equality in relation to men, but must acknowledge that the broader dimensions of race and class undermine the effectiveness of the women's movement more broadly. This is clear when there is a recognition that Western women's attempts to receive parity with men through the conventional channels of Western society are not paralleled in other societies and more significantly, these advances for women are often at the expense of third world women through exploitation that leads to economic surpluses in the West (Johnson-Odin, 1991).

Despite recognition of the diversity of thought within first world feminisms and the efforts of some radical white feminists to explore the connections between race, class and gender, Johnson-Odin (1991) suggests:

There is still, among Third World women, a widely accepted perception that the feminism emerging from white, middle-class Western women narrowly confines itself to a struggle against gender discrimination. It is also widely felt that this is the "mainstream" feminism of the West and that it holds most sway and has the most adherents ... and many have defined it as a liberal, bourgeois, or reformist feminism, and criticise it because of its narrow conception of feminist terrain as an almost singularly antisexist struggle. (p. 315)

It has been suggested that the major difference between the feminism of white women and that of women of colour has been the “contrast between a singular focus on gender as a basis for equal rights, and a focus on gender in relation to race and/or class as part of a broader liberation struggle” (Mohanty, 1991, p. 11). Johnson-Odin (1991) suggests that “a narrowly defined feminism, taking the eradication of gender discrimination as the route to ending women’s oppression, is insufficient to redress the oppression of Third World women” (p. 315).

Mohanty (1991) suggests that within third world feminism there has been an insistence on “the complex interrelationships between feminist, antiracist, and nationalist struggles ... the challenge of third world feminisms to white, Western feminisms has been precisely this inescapable link between feminist and political liberation movements” (p. 10).

Zinn et al. (1986) explore several reasons why such an interaction between the elements of race, class and gender have not formed a more inclusive feminism. This relates partly to the “short- and long-term costs of struggling to overcome institutionally supported and historically reproduced hierarchies of inequality;” (p. 298) and partly to the power and profit that white middle-class women gain from this situation remaining unchanged. Again though, Zinn et al. stress that:

Despite the benefits to some that derive from exclusionary practices, there are also costs to feminist theory and to women’s lives - even to the lives of privileged groups of women. Scholarship that overlooks the diversity of women’s experiences cannot reveal the magnitude, complexity, or interdependence of systems of oppression. Such work underestimates the obstacles to be confronted and helps little in developing practical strategies to overcome the sexist barriers that even privileged women inevitably confront. (p. 299)

Mohanty (1991) provides an analysis focusing on the relational aspects of women’s oppression by suggesting that gender and race are relational terms that indicate the complexities in “womanhood.” She is critical of any attempt to define feminism only in gendered terms because this suggests that being a woman has nothing to do with other important dimensions such as race, class, sexuality and nation. She states that it is “the intersections of the various systemic networks of class, race, (hetero)sexuality, and nation that position us as ‘woman’” (p. 13).

This notion of the relational and interconnected nature of life is a strong theme within third world feminism. Russo (1991) stresses the interconnections of race, sex, sexuality, class and ethnicity and suggests that this must involve a close analysis of the lives of both white women and women of colour. hooks (1995) states that:

When all women and men engaged in feminist struggle understand the interlocking nature of systems of domination, of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the feminist movement will regain its revolutionary progressive momentum. (p. 107)

Collins (1986, 1991) has done extensive work in rejecting the previous additive approaches of feminism and advocating an approach based on the interlocking systems of oppression in society. She begins her analysis with a recognition of the unique and valuable standpoint of black feminists. She talks about black women's 'outsider-within' perspective which has developed because of the specific location of black women in the labour market and the different ways in which they experience the world. Black women then, bring a "special angle of vision" to the knowledge development process (Collins, 1991, p. 21). Black women's standpoint is defined as "those experiences and ideas shared by African-American women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society - and theories that interpret these experiences" (Collins, 1991, p. 22). Collins suggests that this unique standpoint may actually work to benefit and enrich sociological theory more generally.

The rejection of additive approaches in thinking about the oppression of women is central to Collins' (1991) work. She suggests that the oppressive systems in society such as race, sexual orientation, age, class, religion and gender work together to form "one overarching structure of domination" (p. 221). She states that "viewing relations of domination for Black women for any given socio-historical context as being structured via a system of interlocking race, class, and gender oppression expand the focus of analysis from merely describing the similarities and differences distinguishing these systems of oppression and focuses greater attention on how they interconnect" (p. 222). This process of domination "operates by seducing, pressuring, or forcing African-American women and members of subordinate groups to replace individual and cultural ways of knowing with the dominant group's specialised thought" (p. 229).

This focus on the connecting aspects of oppression is significant in that the goal becomes one of exploring links and interactions between the multiple elements and systems of oppression rather than prioritising one form of oppression over others. Collins (1991) states that “rather than adding to existing theories by inserting previously excluded variables, Black feminists aim to develop new theoretical interpretations of the interaction itself” (p. 20).

Collins (1991) discusses the complexities involved in the concept of oppression in terms of the relationship between the subordination and domination that characterises most people’s lives. While most people are able to identify the ways in which they are oppressed, very few are able or willing to readily identify their role as oppressors. She argues:

In essence, each group identifies the oppression with which it feels most comfortable as being fundamental and classifies all others as being of lesser importance. Oppression is filled with such contradictions because these approaches fail to recognise that a matrix of domination contains very few pure victims or oppressors. Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone’s lives. (p. 229)

The suggestion here is that by focusing on the interlocking nature of oppression, people will be able to identify their position as a member of multiple dominant groups and multiple subordinate groups (Collins, 1991).

The notion that black feminist thought has the capacity to inform our understandings of the social relations of domination more generally is a significant part of Collins’ argument. She is attempting to use the experiences of black women to uncover a larger and more universal process of domination (Collins, 1991). This relates to the location of black women’s struggles in the broader struggle for humanity and human empowerment (Collins, 1991). Similarly, hooks (1990a) stresses the importance of seeing femaleness as a construction that has been formed through a combination of factors such as race, class and gender. Ending domination in any of these forms requires attention to this combination. As hooks (1990a) claims:

Feminism as liberation struggle must exist apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms. We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression, that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while

these systems remain intact. This knowledge should consistently inform the direction of feminist theory and practice. (p.188)

Black feminist thought insists on a dual focus for empowerment and change that includes both the changed consciousness of individual people and social transformation of social and political structures and institutions in society (Collins, 1991). As Collins argues:

Empowerment involves rejecting the dimensions of knowledge, whether personal, cultural, institutional, that perpetuate objectification and dehumanisation. African-American women and other individuals in subordinate groups become empowered when we understand and use those dimensions of our individual, group, and disciplinary ways of knowing that foster our humanity as fully human subjects. (p. 230)

Johnson-Odin (1991) provides a useful summary of the concerns of third world women:

Third world women can embrace the concept of gender identity, but must reject an ideology based solely on gender. Feminism, therefore, must be a comprehensive and inclusive ideology and movement that incorporates yet transcends gender-specificity. We must create a feminist movement which struggles against these things which can clearly be shown to oppress women, whether based on race, sex, or class or resulting from imperialism. Such a definition of feminism will allow us to isolate the gender-specific element in women's oppression while simultaneously relating it to broader issues, to the totality of what oppresses us as women. If the feminist movement does not address itself also to issues of race, class, and imperialism, it cannot be relevant to alleviating the oppression of most of the women of the world. (pp. 321-322)

2.6 Standpoint Epistemology

Both socialist feminists and third world feminists have based their approach to knowledge generation on the principles of standpoint epistemology and this perspective has informed the development of the research methodology in this research.

The standpoint perspective has its history in the critical tradition and specifically, historical materialism (Harding, 1986; Hawkesworth, 1989; Nielsen, 1990) and suggests that "one's everyday life has epistemological consequences and implications - the disadvantaged have the potential to be more knowledgeable, in a way, than the dominant group" (Nielsen, 1990, p. 11). The argument here is that gender, class and race all influence an individual's understanding of the world and that "knowledge is always mediated by a host of factors related to an individual's particular position in a determinate sociopolitical formation at a specific point in history" (Hawkesworth, 1989,

p. 536). Harding (1989) suggests that this perspective implies that “human activity not only structures but also sets limits on understanding” (p. 194). As Nielsen (1990) explains:

... standpoint epistemology begins with the idea that less powerful members of society have the potential for a more complete view of social reality than others, precisely because of their disadvantaged position. That is, in order to survive (socially and sometimes even physically), subordinate persons are attuned to or attentive to the perspective of the dominant class (for example, white, male, wealthy) as well as their own. This awareness gives them the potential for ... double consciousness - a knowledge, awareness of, and sensitivity to both the dominant world view of the society and their own minority (for example, female, black, poor) perspective. (Nielsen, 1990, p.10)

Hartsock (1987) has drawn on the Marxist notion of the importance of the standpoint of the proletariat in the overthrow of capitalism and applied it to the material conditions of women’s lives to create the grounds for a feminist standpoint. She states that a standpoint is not only indicative of an interested position but also of a level of engagement. In this sense it is argued that standpoint “carries with it the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible” (p. 285). In relation to the position of women in society, the dominant male standpoint is considered inadequate.

Nielsen (1990) suggests that feminist standpoints do not begin and end with gender but rather “involve a level of awareness and consciousness about one’s social location and this location’s relation to one’s lived experience” (p. 24). This standpoint perspective relies on a recognition of the different experiences of men and women and that these experiences provide different understandings of being in the world. Men have been corrupted by power and patriarchy (Jansen 1990). Jansen states that “we must all see from some perspective, immaculate perception, objectivity, and pure science are impossible” (p. 242). In a sense there is a privileging of the ‘subjectivity of the oppressed’ (Lennon & Whitford 1994). Nielsen goes on to suggest that this feminist epistemological standpoint implies that “a woman’s perspective (if transformed through consciousness-raising) will lead to more accurate, more complex knowledge” (p. 25). Therefore, a feminist perspective will lead to a more effective and successful science less likely to replicate existing inequalities (Hawkesworth, 1989).

There are both positive potentials and difficulties with the standpoint perspective. There are change possibilities in the notion of valuing and including the standpoints of a range of different groups of people. As Nielsen (1990) states, “a more complex understanding of social relations could promote change for the betterment of all or have a liberating effect” (p. 25). However, there are also several difficulties with the assumptions implicit in this perspective. Flax (1993a) talks about her scepticism of any standpoint, whether it is race or class or gender:

Standpoint theory requires one to believe a position that is highly contingent and constructed (eg. race, gender, or feminist consciousness) results in or can be the basis of a not just different but objectively better, less biased, and more inclusive grasp of ‘reality’. They logically entail the assumption that there is a relatively stable, similarly determined unit of experience that can and should be represented through a singular category. Emancipation depends upon locating or constructing such a unity and speaking in its name. (p. 23)

There are implications in this for the nature of truth given that standpoint theory rejects the notion of an absolute truth while still maintaining the referential function of science and knowledge (Lennon & Whitford, 1994). This is evident in Hawkesworth’s (1989) assertion that:

Although [feminist standpoint theorists] repudiate the possibility of an unmediated truth, feminist standpoint epistemologies do not reject the notion of truth altogether. On the contrary, they argue that while certain social positions (the oppressor’s) produce distorted ideological views of reality, other social positions (the oppressed’s) can pierce ideological obfuscation and attain a correct and comprehensive understanding of the world. (p. 536)

As Nielsen (1990) notes, “the standpoint concept implies that one group’s perspective is more real (better or more accurate) than another’s. And ‘more accurate’ implies that there are some criteria for accuracy. Again this raises the problematic idea of an objective reality.” (p. 25). In effect, the recognition of the value of one standpoint allows for the possibility of other standpoints and “this in turn problematises the truth-claims of feminist scholarship as a ‘successor science’” (Stanley & Wise, 1990, p.27). The validity of epistemic privilege is questioned if all socially marginalised groups are recognised as equally epistemically privileged (Bar On, 1993). As Stanley and Wise point out:

We are driven to recognise the existence of not only ‘a’ feminist standpoint but also those of black women, working-class women, lesbian women, and other ‘minority’ women, and also those women who combine these oppressions. Once we admit the existence of feminist *standpoints* there can be no a priori reason for

placing these in any kind of hierarchy; each has *epistemological* validity because each has *ontological* validity. Here we have contextually grounded *truths*. (p.28)

Harding (1986) asks the question, “Can there be a feminist standpoint if women’s (or feminists’) social experience is divided by class, race, and culture?” (p. 26) and “do not these identities undercut the standpoint assumption that common experiences as women create identities capable of providing the grounds for a distinctive epistemology and politics?” (p. 163). She suggests that this scepticism has partially led to the attraction of postmodernism for many feminists.

In addition to this, the standpoint perspective implies that the greatest source of knowledge generation comes from those who are most disadvantaged in society. As Nielsen (1990) states:

When carried to its logical conclusion, however, the implication of this notion is that the greater the oppression, the broader or more inclusive one’s potential knowledge is, a conclusion that few scholars can agree with. This conclusion leads one into a discussion that is not very productive about who is more oppressed (and how to prove it) and therefore potentially more knowledgeable. (p. 25)

Flax (1990b) talks about the dangers in assuming that these standpoints are unaffected by social and political processes and that “the oppressed are not in fundamental ways damaged by their social experience” (p. 56).

Bar On (1993) considers that a possible conclusion to these critiques is that the standpoint position of epistemic privilege should be abandoned, yet she disputes this by pointing out that the value of recognising the unique standpoints of different groups by focusing on “the authority of members of socially marginalised groups to speak for themselves, which is an authority they do not have if everyone is equally capable to know them and their situation” (p. 95). She goes on to state that these socially marginalised groups “demand that their voices, voices that have been excluded through the process of social marginalisation, be given the respectful attention given to the voices of socioculturally hegemonic experts” (p. 95).

Stanley and Wise (1990) have addressed some of these criticisms by exploring the ‘silenced’ epistemologies of black feminist epistemology and lesbian epistemology. The

significance of third world feminism for this thesis has already been discussed in the previous section (2.5) of this chapter. It is also significant in terms of black feminist epistemology, specifically the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1986, 1991). It is in the work of Collins that the relevance of black feminist thought is most relevant for this thesis. Her work is explored in some depth here given her development of standpoint theory as a useful approach to knowledge generation.

As previously mentioned, Collins (1986, 1991) uses the term 'outsider within' to describe the unique standpoint of black women. Collins suggests that this standpoint has the potential, along with the standpoints of other marginalised groups, to greatly enhance and enrich, and to reveal previously unseen aspects of reality through viewing the contradictions between the dominant group's ideologies and actions. Collins (1986) points out four assumptions inherent in this epistemological position. Firstly, it is not possible to separate the content and structure of thought from the forces, historical and material, that shape those who produce this thought. Secondly, black women have a unique standpoint on their experiences and there is some shared perception of commonalities among black women of these experiences. Thirdly, not only are there some commonalities between the experiences of black women, but there is also great diversity in class, age, sexuality, etc., which produce different issues and themes. Lastly, this standpoint may not be obvious to black women themselves and this indicates an important role for black feminist academics in producing theories that will inform black women themselves about their standpoint.

Black feminist epistemology is inspired by "the knowledge that the minds and talents of our grandmothers, mothers, and sisters have been suppressed, [therefore] ... the task of reclaiming Black women's subjugated knowledge takes on special meaning for Black women intellectuals" (Collins, 1991, p. 13). In this sense, black feminist epistemology challenges the actual definitions of knowledge production and occurs through a merger of thought and action (Collins, 1991). As Collins argues:

Black feminist thought as specialised thought reflects the thematic content of African-American women's experiences. But because Black women have had to struggle against white male interpretations of the world in order to express a self-defined standpoint, Black feminist thought can best be viewed as subjugated knowledge. The suppression of Black women's efforts for self-definition in traditional sites of knowledge production has led African-American women to use alternative sites such as music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday

behaviour as important locations for articulating the core themes of a Black feminist consciousness. (pp. 201-202)

Collins (1991) stresses the importance of black feminist thought using alternative processes that may appear to violate some of the assumptions of traditional positivist epistemology. She refers to her use of language, the inclusion of her own voice as part of the broader group of black feminist women; her decision to include parts of her own life story in her work; and her reliance on the voices of other black women rather than simply relying on statistical information (Collins, 1991). She states that “these conscious epistemological choices signal my attempts not only to explore the thematic content of Black feminist thought but to do so in a way that does not violate its basic epistemological framework” (p. 202).

There is a rejection of the usefulness of positivist epistemology on the grounds that this perspective requires the rejection of many of the elements important to the lives of black feminists, such as distancing between subject and object of research, the absence of emotions, and the use of adversarial methods in establishing truth claims (Collins, 1991).

Collins goes on to state:

Such criteria ask African-American women to objectify ourselves, devalue our emotional life, displace our motivations for furthering knowledge about Black women, and confront in an adversarial relationship those with more social, economic and professional power. It therefore seems unlikely that Black women would use a positivist epistemological stance in rearticulating a Black women’s standpoint. (p. 205-206)

It is suggested that part of the usefulness of a black feminist standpoint lies in the intersections of the Afrocentric and feminist standpoints (Collins, 1991). Through exploring points of contact between these two standpoints, Collins states that she is challenging the additive analyses of oppression that suggests that black women have a more accurate view of reality. Collins points to the same criticisms of standpoint epistemology cited above which challenge the suggestion that the most marginalised groups will have the ‘truest’ standpoints. She states that while “it is tempting to claim that Black women are more oppressed than everyone else and therefore have the best standpoint from which to understand the mechanisms, processes and effects of oppression, this simply may not be the case” (p. 207). Black feminist thought provides only one angle of vision and is in this sense, a partial perspective (Collins, 1991). She goes on to illustrate this point noting that:

The overarching matrix of domination houses multiple groups, each with varying experiences with penalty and privilege that produce corresponding partial perspectives, situated knowledges, and for clearly identifiable subordinate groups, subjugated knowledges. No one group has a clear angle of vision. No one group possess the theory or methodology that allows it to discover the absolute 'truth' or, worse yet, proclaim its theories and methodologies as the universal norm evaluating other groups' experiences. (pp. 234-235)

The usefulness of this standpoint is in the emphasis on concrete experience and the connection between thought and action. As Collins (1991) argues:

This dimension of a Black women's standpoint rejects either/or dichotomous thinking that claims that *either* thought *or* concrete action is desirable and that merging the two limited the efficacy of both. Such approaches generate deep divisions among theorists and activists which are more often fabricated than real. Instead, by espousing a both/and orientation that views thought and action as part of the same process, possibilities for new relationships between thought and action emerge. That Black women should embrace a both/and conceptual orientation grows from Black women's experiences living as both African-Americans and women and, in many cases, in poverty. (pp. 28-29)

Collins (1991) uses the notion of black women's everyday experiences as the basis for her epistemological position, and she outlines four elements of an Afrocentric feminist epistemology. Firstly, she states that concrete experience is a criterion for credibility in making knowledge claims. This valuing of the concrete is considered an aspect of Afrocentric women's traditions and incorporates the use of stories and narrative. Secondly, the use of dialogue is important in that connectedness rather than separation is considered an essential aspect of knowledge production. This is especially important given the Afrocentric emphasis on harmony and holistic approaches. The ethic of caring is the third aspect of this epistemological position. Here Collins suggests that "personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process" (p. 215). There are three components of the ethic of caring - an emphasis on individual uniqueness; the appropriateness of emotions in dialogues; and developing the capacity for empathy. She also points out the convergence of both African-American and feminist values in the ethic of caring. The last aspect of this epistemological position is the ethic of personal accountability which suggests that people must be accountable for their knowledge claims and this involves a recognition of belief systems that are unavoidably personal. In this sense, "knowledge claims made by individuals respected for their moral and ethical connections to their ideas will carry more weight than those offered by less respected figures" (p. 218).

Collins (1991) sums up the benefits of this epistemological position:

Alternative knowledge claims in and of themselves are rarely threatening to conventional knowledge. Such claims are routinely ignored, discredited, or simply absorbed and marginalised in existing paradigms. Much more threatening is the challenge that alternative epistemologies offer to the basic process used by the powerful to legitimate their knowledge claims. If the epistemology used to validate knowledge comes into question, then all prior knowledge claims validated under the dominant model become suspect. An alternative epistemology challenges all certified knowledge and opens up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth. This existence of a self-defined Black women's standpoint using an Afrocentric feminist epistemology calls into question the content of what currently passes as truth and simultaneously challenges the process of arriving at that truth. (p. 219)

2.7 Relevance for this Research

Within modernist feminist approaches, socialist feminism and third world feminism have most strongly informed this research. Standpoint theory is a feature of both these perspectives and has informed the methodology of this research. These positions exist in distinction to liberal feminism and positivist approaches to knowledge given that these liberal positions aim to support rather than challenge the social system. The following sections explore the relevance of socialist feminism, third world feminism and standpoint theory for this thesis.

2.7.1 Socialist Feminism

In the early stages of this research, one of the most appealing aspects of socialist feminism was the attempt to create an overarching theory capable of encompassing all feminist perspectives into one - a synthesis of thought about women's oppression. My initial approach to this research was consistent with this aim in that I was attempting to create a theory capable of informing work with young people in a more effective way. However, this was also one of the central issues leading to the reconceptualisation in the research given that this approach to theory development was not consistent with the findings from my interactions with the research participants.

Socialist feminism also offered an understanding of the complex issue of difference and the ways in which difference oppresses, a detailed, integrative analysis of the social system, and a perspective on the need for transformative change to society. I was particularly interested in the way in which socialist feminism attempted to acknowledge difference. Most importantly however, was the emphasis placed on linking personal and political experiences within a transformative approach to change. Within this perspective social change must emerge both personally and politically in a 'total' sense. Socialist feminists also stress the importance of subjectivity in the change process, a concept of relevance to this research.

2.7.2 Third World Feminism

Third world feminism extends many of the insights of socialist feminism in these key areas and has become a more central perspective in informing this research. Third world feminism is relevant in a number of ways. The notion of one theoretical perspective with the capacity to unite all women is also the primary area of concern expressed by third world feminism (Collins, 1986, 1991; hooks, 1990a; Hurtado, 1989; Johnson-Odin, 1991; Lorde, 1982a; Mohanty, 1991; Zinn et al., 1986) and postmodern feminism (Brown, 1991; Flax, 1990a; Fraser & Nicholson, 1990; Giroux, 1991; Gorman, 1993; Hawkesworth, 1989; Jansen, 1990; Stanley & Wise, 1990; Tong, 1998). Instead, third world feminism advocates for the 'partial' perspective that is gained through exploring the uniqueness of woman's experiences. This argument is consistent with elements of the postmodern feminist position developed later in this thesis and it has influenced my decision to further explore more relativist, rather than absolute, positions.

Relatedly, issues of difference and diversity are critical to third world feminism and these issues are considered essential to be addressed and dealt with rather than ignored. Third world feminism is committed to incorporating the experiences of all women and their differences in non-oppressive ways and advocates the benefits of this for all women and feminism as a social movement. One of the most interesting ways in which third world feminism has explored the notion of difference relates to the intersection of our roles as oppressed and oppressors - a theme that is of considerable significance to this research.

In addition, the analysis of the social processes of domination and oppression are well developed within this perspective, particularly given the willingness to embrace the

notion of oppression and multiple positions within it. The exploration of the interconnections and interrelationships between systems of domination, rather than a structural analysis focusing solely on discrete systems (such as class or race or gender) is particularly useful for this research.

In relation to change, the explicit agenda for third world feminism is an egalitarian one that emphasises the broader struggle for humanity and is committed to liberation from oppression in all its forms. This ensures that a feminist analysis from this perspective is as readily applicable to all forms of social analysis and action, ranging from gender issues to class, race, age, sexuality, etc. Included in this movement for social change is a recognition of the importance of linking personal and political levels and agitating on all levels for the most effective change to occur.

However, it is in relation to methodological issues that third world feminism is most central in this research, specifically through the use of standpoint theory.

2.7.3 Standpoint Theory

One of the critical contributions of feminism to social theory has been to expose and explore the political nature of knowledge development. The way in which the epistemological foundations of traditional research processes, located within positivism, have given rise to and maintained reifications in our conceptualisations has been crucial. Feminism has contributed to understanding the ways in which the separations between individuals/society and theory/practice have been maintained and these perspectives have been significant in the early development of this thesis.

It is argued in this thesis that knowledge development is a political process. Traditional research serves an important function by both legitimating the current way in which our society operates, as well as severely limiting the possibilities for change. This is especially true in terms of the gendered nature of knowledge. By exploring and critiquing these current processes, potential for the development of alternative ways of knowing may be opened up and therefore the possibility arises of generating knowledge that may promote fundamental and meaningful change to our society.

The views inherent in standpoint epistemology resonated very strongly with my early research aims in terms of my desire to generate knowledge that was more informed (through seeking young people and youth workers' specific standpoints) and therefore more able to produce some level of change. In a similar way to the theorists discussed here, I was interested to look at young people and youth workers' standpoints in relation to their life experiences and to the broader society. I was aware from my own professional experience as a youth worker that these standpoints were marginalised in the dominant discourses and my research was attempting to elevate these standpoints to a more prominent level.

One of the difficulties with standpoint epistemology is the suggestion that some perspectives are 'truer' than others, Collin's work, however, addresses many of these concerns while preserving the importance of attempting to capture and value the standpoints of a range of different people. Collins deals with the issue of truth and standpoint theory by suggesting that a particular standpoint does not signify a 'truth' but rather one perspective on a particular issue. Collins' concept of the 'outsider within' also resonated very strongly with my impression of the position of young people (and youth work) in Australia.

My methodology has been informed by a number of points that Collins made in relation to her use of alternative research processes in standpoint epistemology; for example, the focus on including her own voice and story, listening to the voices of research participants rather than engaging in a more detached research process (such as collecting statistics), holding subject and object together in the research, and the importance of emotion. Standpoint epistemology became a particularly relevant perspective for this research. Combined with feminist personal narratives, standpoint theory provided a clear focus on the specific and partial standpoints of young people and youth workers as a way of exploring their unique experiences.

2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have juxtaposed system supporting theoretical and methodological approaches with system challenging approaches. I have suggested that liberal feminism and positivist approaches to knowledge reinforce the status quo. This thesis is concerned

with the development of system challenging perspectives and therefore I have detailed both socialist feminism and third world feminism, particularly standpoint theory, as relevant for this research.

CHAPTER THREE

POSTMODERNISM AND FEMINISM

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the impact of postmodernism on modernist feminist theory, with particular attention to those aspects of feminist theory aligning themselves with postmodern thought (postmodern feminisms). The first section provides an introductory discussion on the nature of postmodernism. Following on from this, I outline the major arguments within the diversity of postmodern perspectives and the relationship of postmodernism to modernism. In the following section the relationship between feminism and postmodernism is explored and a critique of postmodernism by a range of feminist theorists is elaborated. The remainder of the chapter explores postmodern feminisms. It is suggested that the central issue for postmodern feminisms is how to retain social, political and personal agency and action without a corresponding adherence to notions of universality and absolute truth.

This chapter aims to present a brief and partial overview of these issues in relation to the major themes of this thesis. Consistent with the transition that has occurred in theorising in this thesis, both this and chapter five provide substantial information on the postmodern feminist positions on the nature of knowledge generation and subjectivity which are developed in the later sections of this thesis.

3.2 Postmodernism: An Introduction

Postmodernism, it appears, defies clear definition or description by not adhering to any actual or unified discourse (Flax, 1990a) and there is widespread lack of agreement about what the term postmodernism actually means (Madison, 1988). Attempting to answer the question ‘What is postmodernism?’ has been described as comparable to ‘hunting the dodo’ (Graham, Doherty & Malek, 1992). For Rosenau (1992) “postmodernism is stimulating and fascinating; and at the same time it is always on the brink of collapsing into confusion” (p. 14).

Rosenau (1992) comments on the ‘cut and paste’ nature of postmodernism given the many positions encompassed under its umbrella. Butler (1992) is critical of the way in which the complex differences amongst these positions seem to be settled “in a single stroke, providing a substantive, a noun, that includes those positions as so many of its modalities or permutations” (p. 4). For McLaren (1994) postmodernism is both contested as a term and also indicative of a “disciplinary archipelago consisting of post-structuralism, deconstruction, and critical hermeneutics scattered through the sea of social theory” (p. 194). There is little doubt, as Flax (1990a) remarks, that the “persons and modes of thinking aggregated under the category of postmodernism are quite heterogenous in regard to voice, style, content, and concerns” (p. 188). Similarly, Butler points out:

It may come as some surprise to some purveyors of the Continental scene to learn that Lacanian psychoanalysis in France positions itself officially against poststructuralism, that Kristeva denounces postmodernism, that Foucaultians rarely relate to Derrideans, that Cixous and Irigaray are fundamentally opposed, and that the only tenuous connection between French feminism and deconstruction exists between Cixous and Derrida ... (p. 4)

Interestingly, the very nature of postmodernism encourages this lack of clear perspective through its critique of the universality of grand theorising that has characterised the Enlightenment. Flax (1990a) notes that by “even speaking of ‘postmodernism,’ I run the risk of violating some of its central values – heterogeneity, multiplicity, and difference” (p. 188). Similarly, Butler (1992) states that it is “paradoxical, at best, that the act of conceptual mastery that effects this dismissive grouping of positions under the postmodern wants to ward off the peril of political authoritarianism” (p. 5). Flax (1990a) resolves this dilemma by concluding that it is possible to speak of postmodernism given that postmodernists claim that “the fictive and nonunitary nature of concepts need not negate their meaningfulness or usefulness” (p. 188).

Rather than speak of postmodernism as a discrete perspective, many authors (Butler, 1992; Ermarth, 2001; Harvey, 1990; Lyotard, 1984; Mouffe, 1992; Seidman, 1994) view postmodernism as a way of speaking, an historical process, theoretical position or condition. Lyotard, the theorist who coined the term ‘postmodernism’, talks about ‘the postmodern condition’ characterised by ‘an incredulity towards metanarratives’. Seidman refers to the ‘postmodern turn’ characterising the Western world and points out that this development is not specific to any one approach or paradigm. Rather, “the terms

‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ refer to broad social and cultural patterns or sensibilities that can be analytically distinguished for the purpose of highlighting social trends” (Seidman, p. 2). Mouffe agrees that postmodernism cannot be understood as a clear theoretical approach because issues central to postmodernism, such as the critique of universalism, humanism and rationalism have “come from many different quarters and it is far from being limited to the authors called ‘poststructuralists’ or ‘postmodernists’” (p. 369). As Seidman argues:

There is no one postmodern paradigm of social knowledge. Under the banner of the postmodern there are a plurality of approaches and conceptual strategies. ... If I choose to call these premises and conceptual strategies “postmodern” it is largely for rhetorical reasons. It reflects my sense that the creation of an alternative, post-Enlightenment culture of knowledge requires a certain level of social mobilisation, a certain posturing as a crusade, a certain presumption of there being a movement – organised and sustained in aim. The term postmodern becomes the occasion for that effort at consolidation and mobilisation, for the crystallisation of the accumulated discontents that are surfacing in many contexts in the western organisation of knowledge and culture. (p. 21)

Madison (1988) suggests that postmodernism provides its own clue to uncovering its meaning when it maintains that all meaning is diacritical and therefore what a ‘thing’ is, is only its difference from that which it is not. Therefore, in order to understand the term postmodernism, an understanding of modernism, that which postmodernism is not, is required (Madison, 1988). Graham et al. (1992) agree that it is easier to say what postmodernism is not, rather than what it is.

Seidman (1994) argues that the recognition that the Western world is moving in a postmodern direction does not necessarily signify the end of modernity. This position is shared by Bauman (1991) who considers postmodernism a mature and reflective form of modernity. He states:

Postmodernity does not necessarily mean the end ... of modernity. Postmodernity is no more (but no less either) than the modern mind taking a long, attentive and sober look at itself, at its condition and its past works, not fully liking what it sees and sensing the urge to change. Postmodernity is modernity coming of age: modernity looking at itself at a distance rather than from inside, making a full inventory of its gains and losses, psychoanalysing itself, discovering the intentions it never before spelled out, finding them mutually cancelling and incongruous. Postmodernity is modernity coming to terms with its own impossibility; a self-monitoring modernity, one that consciously discards what it was once unconsciously doing. (p. 272)

A number of other authors have explored the various perspectives within postmodernism and attempted to categorise them. For example, Benhabib (1992) and Graham et al. (1992) both talk about ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ postmodernism; Ebert (1991) uses the terms ‘resistance’ and ‘ludic’ postmodernism; and Yeatman (1991) and Rosenau (1992) use the terms ‘affirmative’ and ‘sceptical’ postmodernists which correspond to the ‘weak’ (resistance) / ‘strong’ (ludic) distinction. Rosenau distinguishes between a form of postmodernism (sceptical / strong / ludic) in which “the world is fragmented, disjointed, caught up in a sea of meaninglessness, vagueness, chaos, and has no moral boundaries” (p. 16) and another form (affirmative / weak / resistance) which is “a philosophical and ontological intellectual practice that is nondogmatic, tentative, and nonideological” (p. 16). The goal of the affirmative perspective is the “formation of postmodern social movements which consist of coalitions of individuals who possess shared collective experience” (Chester & Sagura, 1997, p. 110).

This diversity of positions within postmodernism does not, however, prohibit the exploration of common concerns given that “postmodernist discourses *are* unified in identifying certain subjects of conversation as particularly appropriate to and necessary for ‘our’ time” (Flax, 1990a, p. 188). Postmodernism is characterised by “an aversion to the idea of *universality*” (Lovibond, 1989, p. 6); challenges to the totalising ways of thinking that have been central to Enlightenment thought (Graham et al., 1992; Harvey, 1990; McLaren, 1994; Milovanovic, 1995; Nicholson, 1990; Rosenau, 1992); the rejection of “representational and objective or rational concepts of knowledge and truth; grand, synthetic theorising meant to comprehend Reality as and in a unified whole; and any concept of self or subjectivity in which it is not understood as produced as an effect of discursive practices” (Flax, p. 188).

The dual and related notions of subjectivity and an objective and knowable world have been the centre points of modernism (Madison, 1988). If postmodernism signals the end of modernism it therefore means the “end of what modernism understood by the ‘subject,’ as well as the end of the ‘objective world’ (a world which is fully what it is in itself and which simply waits around for a cognising subject to come along and form a ‘mental representation’ of it” (Madison, p.168).

Postmodern perspectives attempt to explore modernity, not through applying modernist criteria and judgements, but through deconstruction (Rosenau, 1992). Flax (1990a) argues that the postmodern position focuses on three 'errors' within Western thought: firstly, a misrepresentation of the real requiring the suppression of difference; secondly, a distorted perspective on the value of truth and its emancipatory potential; thirdly, the self as the subject of knowledge (subject of and subject to). For postmodernism these 'errors' are not resolvable within modernism. As Flax notes:

The deconstructionists do not intend to counterpose an alternative *philosophy* that would more "adequately" "solve" the problems of being, truth, or subjectivity. Rather they wish to persuade us not to ask the old questions anymore, to change the subjects of the conversation completely. (p. 193)

Postmodern thought has posed a significant challenge to the social sciences which have "derived their legitimacy from the twin claims of being true and contributing to human advancement," concepts which are now contested by postmodernism (Seidman, 1994, p. 4). Similarly, postmodernism has become of increasing significance to feminism as feminist thought has faced the challenge of dealing with the universalising tendencies of early feminist theory and the more partial and limited theorising characteristic of postmodernism (Bordo, 1990; Wearing, 1996). As Bordo argues:

Where once the prime objects of academic feminist critique were the phallogentric narratives of our male-dominated disciplines, now feminist criticism has turned to its own narratives, finding them reductionist, totalising, inadequately nuanced, valorising of gender difference, unconsciously racist, and elitist. It seems possible to discern what may be a new drift within feminism, a new scepticism about the use of gender as an analytical category. (p. 135)

However, it is also true to say that many of the issues raised within postmodernism have historically been at the centre of feminist theory. In fact, some theorists (Benhabib, 1992; Flax, 1990b; Mouffe, 1992; Seidman, 1994) argue that feminism is a significant part of the 'postmodern turn'. For example, Benhabib argues that "feminism and postmodernism have emerged as two leading currents of our time, and each is in its own way profoundly critical of the principles and meta-narratives of western Enlightenment and modernity (p. 203).

3.3 The Postmodern Argument

Prior to outlining postmodern feminist positions the postmodern argument will be briefly outlined. This section is intended as a brief overview of some of the central tenets of postmodernism and not an exhaustive discussion of the complexities inherent in postmodern perspectives.

All views within postmodernism share a common attack on the Enlightenment and a belief that there has been a breakdown in the metanarrative of the Enlightenment (Flax, 1990a; Harvey, 1990; Seidman, 1994). These perspectives broadly advocate for postfoundational, pragmatic premises and points of departure from modernist thought (Seidman, 1994). As Flax points out:

Despite their many differences, these discourses are all “deconstructive”; they seek to distance us from and make us sceptical about the ideas concerning truth, knowledge, power, history, self, and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimations for contemporary Western culture. (p. 29)

Postmodern perspectives reflect a movement away from the grand theories and worldviews that encapsulate all dimensions of life (Gorman, 1993; Harvey, 1990; Seidman, 1994). The two primary parts of the postmodern position on metanarratives are the rejection of dualisms characteristic of Enlightenment thought and the challenge to the primacy of the scientific model of knowledge development (Hekman, 1990).

According to theorists such as Lyotard, Rorty and Foucault, metanarratives provide the perspective from which one may view the world and the self (Seidman, 1994). As Seidman notes:

The decline of the legitimacy of such narratives reflects, in part, a considerable doubt about the credibility of such an ahistorical standpoint and universally valid knowledge. The shift from metanarratives to local narratives and from general theories to pragmatic strategies suggests that in place of assuming a universal mind or a rational knowing subject, we imagine multiple minds, subjects, and knowledges reflecting different social locations and histories. (p. 5)

Postmodern thought seeks to displace these metanarratives through rhetorical means with particular attention to the ways in which the claims of the Enlightenment are inherently contradictory (Flax, 1990a). Further, postmodernists attempt to suggest alternative positions outside Enlightenment claims and to “open up spaces in or from which different and more varied ideas and practices may begin to emerge” (Flax, p. 31).

Implicit in the rejection of metanarratives is the development of “alternative deconstructive discourses [that] must necessarily pay attention to varieties of experience and value whatever they can find of the local and particular. They cannot offer *a* viewpoint, *a* universal subject, *a* way to liberation, development, or happiness, *a* truth that will set us free - not even deconstructionism or postmodernism itself” (Flax, pp. 41-42).

Postmodern perspectives are critical of the Enlightenment notion of a linear history, the idea that society is a process of progressive developments, an evolution toward an Enlightened world (Flax, 1990a; Graham et al., 1992; Harvey, 1990; Sarup, 1993). The rejection of this notion of progress implies that the idea of emancipation is also to be rejected, an idea that many on the political left, including feminism, find unpalatable (Graham et al., 1992; Hekman, 1990). However, Flax (1990a) argues that postmodernists see history as a state of flux and progress as a false concept. She goes on to state:

History is a series of random events with no intrinsic order and no necessary laws that produce causality or even continuity. There is thus no empirical or logical reason to privilege unity, homogeneity, closure, or identity over difference, heterogeneity, alterity, and openness. (p. 33)

In relation to subjectivity, postmodernists speak of the death of the subject, challenging the notion of ‘Man’ as a transcendental being (Flax, 1990a; Harvey, 1990; Sarup, 1993). Postmodernists promote the idea of the decentered subject where the subject is more determined than determining (Milovanovic, 1995). The postmodern subject is “less internally unified than a desiring subject caught within the constraints of various discourses and their structuring properties” (Milovanovic, p. 26). Postmodern thought replaces the modernist view of the subject with an emphasis on the social, historical or linguistic construction of the subject (Flax, 1990a).

Seidman (1994) stresses the importance of the crisis of representation in the postmodern challenge to modernism. He argues that the job of science has been to uncover the truth and therefore progress society towards enlightenment. The foundational discourses in society ensure that the demarcation between truth and myth is clear and that science is privileged as the only path to this truth (Seidman, 1994). Graham et al. (1992) note that

for postmodernists “reality is not something waiting to be discovered. Rather, what we have called knowledge is itself a social or cultural construction” (p. 17).

According to postmodern thought “it is no longer possible to believe in a transcendent truth against which the whole intellectual achievement of the human race to date could be measured and found wanting” (Lovibond, 1989, p. 8). Postmodernists have argued that “it is only in so far as the perspective of one group dismisses that of all others that ‘reality’ can appear to have a unified structure; such theoretical structures are just attempts to police thought” (Crowley & Himmelweit, 1992, p. 336). There is no one reality but rather many realities with their own claim to legitimacy (Graham et al., 1992). In fact, it is not only that there is no such thing as truth and knowledge, but also that what has previously been thought of as truth has been an example of power (Zalewski, 2000).

The implication of this position is that there is no one truth and that instead “we must speak of multiple truths which are neither absolute nor universal” (Hekman, 1990, p. 153). However, this does not mean that postmodernists advocate relative rather than absolute knowledge; instead it is argued that “all knowledge is contextual and historical, thus rendering the opposition between absolute and relative obsolete” (Hekman, p. 153). This not only changes our conception of what might constitute knowledge but suggests that we may need new ways of arriving at or negotiating ‘knowledge’ within particular language games” (Graham et al., 1992, p. 18). Postmodernists attempt to replace truth with notions of conversation, rhetoric and persuasive speech (Flax, 1990a). As Graham et al. note:

Thus knowledge under the postmodern condition is redefined and, combined with the postmodernist rejection of a concept of “truth” waiting to be discovered, marks the end of “enquiry” and its replacement by “conversation.” (p. 18)

According to postmodern thought, in ‘conversation’ it is the process rather than the goal of ‘truth’ that is important; a process where there is no notion of independent reality or universal rules (Graham et al., 1992). For postmodernists, discourse is not neutral. Rather than metanarratives, postmodernists believe that knowledge is fragmented and partial and that there are many discourses reflecting local sites of production (Milovanovic, 1995). As Milovanovic contends:

Postmodernists celebrate local knowledge. Dominant and global knowledge always subvert voices that otherwise seek expression, either directly or indirectly. (p. 32)

Language is central to the construction of truth in that “language does not represent but rather *gives* us our world” (Graham et al., 1992, p. 16). Therefore there is no such thing as objective language because culture is always embedded in language (Graham et al., 1992). Postmodernists elevate language and text to a central position in the study of society (Graham et al., 1992). Not only is language a product of discourse; thoughts rely on language that has been historically and culturally constituted for their expression (Flax, 1990a).

These insights into metanarratives, truth, history, subjectivity and discourse culminate in one of the central arguments of postmodernism - the postmodern position on the value of difference and heterogeneity. Postmodern perspectives argue that the appearance of stability in society depends on the erasure and suppression of differences where these differences contradict this unitary appearance of history (Flax, 1990a). Postmodernists are particularly concerned with the ways in which certain voices/discourses are silenced in society.

There is no absolute truth; rather, truth is an effect of discourse (Flax, 1990a). Discourse has its own set of rules regarding what is true such that each particular discourse both allows and disallows some statements (Flax, 1990a). Therefore metanarratives which claim reference to an absolute truth in order to substantiate their dominance are no truer than any other and are subject to the same restraints of context and specificity. As Flax argues:

A discourse as a whole cannot be true or false because truth is always contextual and rule dependent. Instead discourses are local, heterogeneous, and incommensurable. No non-discourse-dependent or transcendental rules exist that could govern all discourses or a choice between them. Truth claims are in principle ‘undecidable.’ (p. 36)

Therefore power, according to postmodernists, operates through the constraints imposed by certain discourses (Flax, 1990a). Flax argues that this exercise of power is obvious when societies appear ordered and unified because order such as this “always depends upon the subjection of localised, fragmented knowledges, which is a necessary condition

for the appearance of the ‘totalising’ discourses of authority” (p. 41). The ways in which this authority is played out in society relate to the modernist creation of ‘fictive subjects’ whose job it is to legitimate the laws of behaviour and ground them in reason and human nature (Flax, 1990a). As Flax argues further:

The modern state thus depends on the creation and widespread acceptance of a fictive but persuasive account of “human nature” and on the emergence of a group of “experts” whose story about such questions will be considered authoritative and final (p. 40).

3.4 Postmodernism and Feminism

Feminism and postmodernism are the only contemporary theories that present a truly radical critique of the Enlightenment legacy of modernism. No other approaches on the contemporary intellectual scene offer a means of displacing and transforming the masculinist epistemology of modernity. This fact alone creates a bond between the two approaches. (Hekman, 1990, p. 189)

Feminism and postmodernism share many assumptions and provide challenges to each other’s positions in a number of crucial areas (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990; Giroux, 1991; Graham et al., 1992; Hekman, 1990). Nicholson (1990) states that there are many points of overlap between postmodernism and feminism in terms of the feminist critique of Enlightenment thought. Flax (1990b) locates feminism as a form of postmodernism and suggests that “despite an understandable attraction to the (apparently) logical, orderly world of the Enlightenment, feminist theory more properly belongs in the terrain of postmodern philosophy” (p. 41). Though feminism has been an active participant in postmodern discourse, the latter remains a highly contested issue in feminist theory (Tong, 1998).

Tong (1998) begins her exploration of postmodern feminism with recognition of the ‘uneasy’ relationship between them, and the scepticism with which both perspectives approach each other. Feminism has struggled with the universalising nature of its own theories that have shared the same essentialising properties as Enlightenment thought. Women of colour, lesbian women, and many others, have felt defined by feminism’s use of the universal category of women (Butler, 1992; Crowley & Himmelweit, 1992; Felski, 2001; Fraser & Nicholson, 1990; Harding, 1986; Hartsock, 1990; Lennon & Whitford, 1994; Nicholson, 1990; Stanley & Wise, 1990; Strickland, 1994; Tong, 1998). The argument is that women’s standpoint is not a unified position and it is not true that a

focus on the standpoint of (some) women will be superior or more truthful (Crowley & Himmelweit, 1992). Fraser and Nicholson suggest that modernist feminist theories “share some of the essentialist and ahistorical features of metanarratives: They are insufficiently attentive to historical and cultural diversity, and they falsely universalise features of the theorist’s own era, society, culture, class, sexual orientation, and ethnic, or racial group” (p. 27).

Postmodern perspectives challenge feminism’s desire to critique patriarchal processes of grand narratives without simultaneously challenging itself. As Felski (2001) asks: “Can feminism claim to be in any sense more true than the positions it criticises, and how is it to legitimate its own validity claims?” (p. 365).

Nicholson (1990) points out that the inherent difficulties in theorising in the face of difference is the main reason why feminism has turned its attention to postmodernism. For many feminists, postmodernism provides a basis for no longer constructing theory based on the experiences of white, Western, middle-class women, but instead developing a wariness toward generalisations which are oppressive and excluding of other women (Nicholson, 1990). As Strickland (1994) summarises:

Given that feminists are concerned with the problems of essentialism and universalism, about not making false generalisations from their own perspective, with marginalising or excluding the perspectives of others – it is understandable that postmodernist theory, with its wariness of generalisations that transcend the boundaries of culture and region, with its emphasis on partiality and multiplicity, with its apparent attention to difference, diversity and locale, is an attractive approach to take up or espouse. (p. 266)

Postmodern feminists are hesitant therefore, about modernist feminist perspectives in that “they view with suspicion any mode of feminist thought that aims to provide *the* ten steps *all* women must take to achieve liberation” (Tong, 1998, p. 193).¹

3.4.1 Feminist Critique of Postmodernism

Many feminists, however, do not believe that postmodernism has anything of value to offer feminism and that it is in fact oppositional to feminism (Benhabib, 1992; Bordo, 1990; Di Stephano, 1990; Harding, 1990; Hartsock, 1990; Lovibond, 1989; Tong,

¹ However, Bordo (1990) also points out that while earlier feminism excluded many women’s experiences, this work has been significant in that it may not have been possible to “speak of the differences that inflect *gender* if gender had not first been shown to make a difference” (p.41).

1998). Hekman (1990) suggests that feminist reactions to postmodernism range from sceptical to hostile and that these reactions are a feature of the modernist origins of feminism.

One of the central criticisms of postmodernism is the belief that the dismantling of metanarratives will result in the further oppression of women and that the motivation for such a move may well be political given the gains the women's movement has made (Di Stephano, 1990; Hartsock, 1990 Tong, 1989). Lovibond (1989) asks: "How can anyone ask me to say goodbye to 'emancipatory metanarratives' when my own emancipation is still such a patchy, hit-and-miss affair?" (p. 12).

Hartsock (1990) has expressed the essence of the feminist critique of postmodernism:

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? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty emerges about whether the world can be theorised. Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of systematically and rationally organising human society become dubious and suspect. Why is it only now that critiques are made of the will to power inherent in the effort to create theory? I contend that these intellectual moves are no accident (but no conspiracy either). They represent the transcendental voice of the Enlightenment attempting to come to grips with the social and historical changes of the middle-to-late twentieth century. (pp. 163-164)

Building on Hartsock's (1990) position, Felski (2001) suggests that the argument has been effectively made that "contemporary discourses about meaninglessness, instability, and apocalyptic endings reveal more about the standpoint of a disaffected and increasingly marginalised Western intelligentsia from which they emanate rather than serve as an accurate description of a general cultural condition" (p. 363). She continues:

It thus becomes possible to relativise postmodernism as the symptom of a crisis in established male intellectual authority which bears no relevance to feminist concerns. (p. 363)

Benhabib (1992) is critical of the perspective that feminism and postmodernism are close allies, politically and conceptually, particularly in relation to the 'strong' version of postmodernism, which she sees as "not only incompatible with but [undermining] the very possibility of feminism as the theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women" (p. 229). Benhabib argues this point in the following way:

Postmodernism undermines the feminist commitment to women's agency and sense of selfhood, to the reappropriation of women's own history in the name of an emancipated future, and to the exercise of radical social criticism which uncovers gender in all its endless variety and monotonous similarity. (p. 229)

Allen and Baber (1992) point out the danger for feminism in focusing primarily on women's differences when the result may be a 'depoliticised relativism' where "every woman's experience becomes the basis for a feminist epistemology, thereby deconstructing their experiences in the world to such an extent that feminists are in danger of erasing the solidarity that is needed in working towards women's liberation" (p. 6). If no one perspective can be privileged over another, critics of postmodernism suggest that this signifies the 'triumph of nihilism' (Graham et al., 1992).

These criticisms seem inevitable if, as Flax (1992) points out, taking the ideas of postmodernism seriously "is bound to induce a profound uneasiness, or threatened identity, especially among white Western intellectuals, whose consciousness and positions are among its primary subjects of critical analysis" (p. 447). However, black feminists and third world women are also vocal in their critique of postmodernism.

hooks (1990b) notes that very few African American theorists have written about postmodernism. She argues that postmodernism is dominated by white male intellectuals/academics who create a sense of exclusivity through their use of inaccessible language codes (hooks, 1990b). She argues:

Postmodern discourses are often exclusionary even as they call attention to, appropriate even, the experience of "difference" and "Otherness" to provide oppositional political meaning, legitimacy, and immediacy when they are accused of lacking concrete relevance. (p. 23)

hooks (1990b) also acknowledges Hartsock's position, specifically as it relates to the postmodern challenge to the subject by asking, "Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the 'subject' when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time?" (p. 28).

Similarly, Nzomo (1995) does not believe that postmodernism has the potential to offer anything of value to African women given that the relevance of any theory must depend on its applicability and practical utility. She argues:

The postmodernist critique would indeed dismiss the current strategies and visions of African women whose struggles for gender-sensitive democratisation hinge upon universalist feminist ideals. These ideals are manifested in the growing political consciousness among African women, which is leading to a strong sense of self-awareness, self-esteem, female solidarity and the questioning and challenging of gender inequalities in the existing social systems and institutions. (p. 141)

Relatedly, Udayagiri (1995) raises a number of issues about the political potential of postmodernism to assist third world women including the critique of universalist and essentialist categories (while not also attending to the implications of such a critique for political practice), and the paradox of textual analysis when literacy continues to be a function of privilege.

Feminist criticisms of postmodern thought are based on the notion that political agency is undermined with the acceptance of postmodern ideas. However, for postmodern feminists, the postmodern critique of metanarratives may hold potential for increased agency and possibilities for political action.

In response to modernist criticisms such as these, and in defence of postmodern feminisms, Yeatman (1991) makes the point that many postmodern feminist theorists are not without criticism of postmodernism:

We are postmodern sympathisers. However, this does not mean that our relationship to postmodernism is uncritical. It must be clear that it is possible to accept that the postmodern condition is real, in the sense of something we have to contend with and cannot wish away, without taking this to mean that our relationship to this reality takes on the features of a positivistic acceptance of it. (p. 4)

Postmodern feminism's engagement with postmodern ideas does not necessitate unmediated acceptance of all postmodern positions. Postmodern feminists differ in the degree to which they have embraced postmodern ideas, resulting in significant differences between postmodern feminists (Tong, 1998). Yeatman (1994) suggests that postmodern feminism "becomes a very different postmodernism from the quietist, pragmatic versions championed by such as Lyotard and Baudrillard" (p. 188) because postmodern feminists have attempted to combine the most useful aspects of modernism and postmodernism to inform complex questions around multiplicity and difference (Giroux, 1991).

3.5 Postmodern Feminisms

Feminists cannot overcome the privileging of the male and the devaluing of the female until they reject the epistemology that created these categories. The attempt to preserve the 'good' aspects of modernity, or even to privilege the feminine over the masculine, cannot escape from the inherent sexism of Enlightenment epistemology. (Hekman, 1990, p. 8)

Postmodern feminists are sceptical about any universal claims (Jansen, 1990; Stanley & Wise, 1990) and reject the idea that there is 'a' truth about any form of reality (Hawkesworth, 1989). In many ways postmodern feminists share the primary views developed within postmodernism in that postmodern feminists are concerned to develop post-foundational insights and ways of working (Brown, 1991).

However, postmodern feminist perspectives are also concerned that postmodern thought "precludes the possibility of liberating political action" (Hekman, 1990, p. 153). In fact, modernist feminisms have accused postmodernists of being 'politically bankrupt' in abandoning Enlightenment ideals such as truth and rights which are considered central to the goal of emancipation (Hekman, 1990). It has been suggested that postmodernists are capable only of defining what is wrong, unable to then provide directions for action or change: "After all, was it not impossible to generate strong political movements while also deconstructing the categories such movements were based upon?" (Nicholson & Seidman, 1995, p.9).

In general, while postmodern feminists are critical of grand theorising, many have not accepted the complete rejection of all metanarratives given the implications of this for change (Giroux, 1991). If postmodern views about decentering the subject and the social world are accepted, the question is raised about what this means for possibilities for agency, for continuing the political project of feminism, women's liberation and freedom from all forms of oppression in society. Therefore, for many postmodern feminists the critical question is "how can we combine a postmodernist incredulity toward metanarratives with the social-critical power of feminism?" (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990, p. 34).

The following discussion explores postmodern feminist developments in regard to the rejection of metanarratives and the decentering of the social world, with particular

attention to the question of agency. These issues are central to postmodern feminists and a range of responses have been developed. Issues of metanarratives, knowledge generation and agency/change are also of central concern to this research. Chapter five provides a detailed discussion of subjectivity, the other central issue of concern for postmodern feminists.

3.5.1 Philosophy and Political Agency

It is the relationship between social criticism (as advanced by feminism) and philosophy (as advanced by postmodernism) that has captured the attention of postmodern feminists as they attempt to combine a postmodern rejection of foundational thought with a feminist politics. It is suggested that the connection of social criticism and philosophy produces a postmodern feminism which has the potential to recognise commonalities, but not universals, and that would respect differences and conflicts (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990). An exploration of this juxtaposition between social criticism and philosophy is discussed in this section.

As Fraser and Nicholson (1990) summarise:

Thus, each of the two perspectives suggests some important criticism of the other. A postmodernist reflection on feminist theory reveals disabling vestiges of essentialism while a feminist reflection on postmodernism reveals androcentricism and political naiveté ... Thus, the ultimate stake of an encounter between feminism and postmodernism is the prospect of a perspective which integrates their respective strengths while eliminating their respective weaknesses. It is the prospect of a postmodern feminism. (p. 20)

Both the attention to difference and a sense of specificity indicate the importance of the relationship between feminism and postmodernism in knowledge development (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990). Certainly the notion that it is possible to generate knowledge that takes account of all dimensions of people's experience is refuted in postmodern feminism (Bordo, 1990). As Bordo claims:

We ... need to guard against the "view from nowhere" supposition that if we employ the right method we can avoid ethnocentrism, totalising constructions, and false universalisations. No matter how local and circumscribed the object or how attentive the scholar is to the axes that constitute social identity, some of those axes will be ignored and others selected. This is an inescapable fact of human embodiment ... (p. 140)

For many feminists, the postmodern position, including the rejection of human progress, signifies an end to transformative politics (Ebert, 1991). Without a stable subject and a category of 'women' many feminists believe that it is not possible to develop a program of political change (Elam, 1994). However, postmodern feminisms argue that the challenge for feminism is how to re-write the political back into postmodernism (Ebert, 1991). Graham et al., (1992) state that "postmodernism inevitably leads to a paralysis of social movements which rely on modernist notions for the identification of a common purpose and focus for action" (p. 19).

The notions of difference and multiplicity have often been seen to result in a relativist position in which no action or change is possible; however Giroux (1991) suggests that postmodern feminism locates difference as a central part of the movement for change. Hewitt (1992) suggests that, "the trick is, in part, to assure that multiplicity does not become mere relativity" (p. 317) and that this occurs by ensuring a clarity which allows a movement "between theory and practice, research and politics, in order to reach new levels and forms of understanding and new possibilities for action" (p. 318).

Brown (1991) advocates a particular form of postmodern theorising which allows for change as well as accounting for the relativism of postmodernism. Theorising becomes "self-consciously perspectival rather than Archimedean, temporally situated rather than floating above history, framed by and within a particular idiom rather than pretending to universal voice" (Brown, p. 63).

In general postmodern feminists are committed to a more partial perspective than that of modern feminists, one that embraces difference (Hawkesworth, 1989) and therefore assumes that "claims are more plausible because they are grounded in awareness of fractured identities and in the tensions created by solidarity with and between these identities" (Jansen, 1990, p. 243). Therefore, "feminist postmodernists use the 'situatedness' of each finite observer in a particular sociopolitical, historical context to challenge the plausibility of claims that any perspective on the world could escape partiality" (Hawkesworth, p. 536). As Harding (1986) notes:

This approach requires embracing as a fruitful grounding for inquiry the fractured identities modern life creates: Black-feminist, socialist-feminist, women-of-colour, and so on. It requires seeking a solidarity in our oppositions to the dangerous fiction of the naturalised, essentialised, uniquely "human" (read

“manly”) and to the distortion and exploitation perpetrated on behalf of this fiction. (p. 28)

While there is strong agreement among postmodern feminists for an end to theorising that is defining and oppressive, there is also the suggestion by some postmodern feminists that there is a distinction between discourses that are universalising or oppressive and those that are formative or liberating (Benhabib, 1992; Giroux, 1991; Gorman, 1993; Nicholson, 1990; Smiley, 1993). Nicholson argues that postmodernism need not mean the end of universal theories as such, but rather the aim is to develop theories which are not essentialist by situating them in a specific cultural and historical context.

For these postmodern feminists the rejection of grand-narratives is crucial but it is important to stress that what may also be rejected are those narratives that are formative in that they “provide the basis for historically and relationally placing different groups or local narratives within some common project” (Giroux, 1991, p. 22). For some postmodern feminists “it is difficult to imagine any politics of difference as a form of radical social theory if it doesn’t offer a formative narrative capable of analysing difference within rather than against unity” (Giroux, p. 22).

Smiley (1993) suggests that in order to be able to generalise about women’s oppression without being accused of being essentialist, feminists “will have to view generalisations not as embodiments of universality, but as part of a process through which we as social and political actors organise the facts around us according to our own practical concerns and goals” (p. 92). Smiley also makes the distinction between generalisations that are liberating and those that are oppressive. She advocates a generalisation process that is neither essentialist nor oppressive:

I argue that while all explanatory theories impose identities on individuals and separate them from other members of the community, they differ from each other with regard to the oppressiveness of the identities that they impose. If feminists want to develop a mode of generalisation that neither translates into oppressive identities nor creates barriers between individuals who share interests and values in common, they will have to place the practical concerns of women themselves, rather than the coherence of a pre-existing theory (whether it be Marxism, psychoanalysis or postmodernism) at the centre of their attention and develop an understanding of commonality that enables us to grasp how women are disempowered in practice. (pp. 92-93)

Smiley (1993) stresses the importance of being able to distinguish between different modes of generalisations. She argues that the central issue is the way in which commonality is understood in the process of universalising given that many feminist theories begin not with the lived experiences of women but with the deficiencies of existing theories (eg feminism, Marxism, etc) (Smiley, 1993). Smiley stresses the importance of moving beyond asking questions about ‘who women are’ to questions about ‘how women are disempowered in different situations’.

Smiley (1993) advocates three characteristics of generalisations that are liberating rather than oppressive: firstly, that empowerment and disempowerment need to be placed centrally rather than class and gender; secondly, that there should be a recognition that concepts such as empowerment are experienced differently for different women; and thirdly, that oppression itself should be treated as a matter of interpretation that necessitates asking women themselves how they are empowered and disempowered in certain situations.

Benhabib’s (1992) argument is that postmodernism is variously placed in terms of its compatibility with feminism’s political struggle, depending on which version of postmodernism, ‘weak’ or ‘strong’, is employed. Benhabib is critical of the ‘strong’ version of postmodernism and believes that it cannot assist feminism or any other social movement. Benhabib states that the strong version of the postmodern thesis suggests a total rejection of any historical narrative and instead a focus on micro- rather than macro- social practices:

... it would be a mistake to interpret the death of “grand narratives” as sanctioning in the future local stories as opposed to global history. The decision as to how local or global a historical narrative or piece of social-scientific research needs to be cannot be determined by epistemological arguments extraneous to the task at hand. (p. 220)

However, Benhabib (1992) suggests that the ‘weak’ position in postmodernism shares similar concerns with feminism about the inadequacies of universalising theories:

It is futile, let us say, to search for an essence of “motherhood,” as a cross-cultural universal; just as it is futile to seek to produce a single grand theory of female oppression and male dominance across cultures and societies – be such a theory psychoanalytic, anthropological or biological. Politically, the end of such grand narratives would mean rejecting the hegemonial claims of any group or

organisation to 'represent' the forces of history, to be moving with such forces, or to be acting in their name. (p. 219)

Strickland (1994) is less convinced that the postmodern perspective on difference has merit for feminism. She suggests that the postmodern perspective also needs to be linked with an understanding of issues of structural power. Therefore, while it is imperative to pay attention to the 'local' it is also necessary to go beyond this and to see the 'local' in context. Strickland advocates a continued focus on power as well as on perspective and location. She argues:

In order to respond to the challenge which taking difference seriously requires, it seems to me that we do have to utilise some larger-scale structural analyses of social and economic systems, and employ concepts and general categories that deal with gender, racial oppression and so on. I don't think that use of such categories necessarily has to result in universalistic grand theory. (p. 68)

In summary then, these authors (Benhabib, 1992; Giroux, 1991; Nicholson, 1990; Smiley, 1993; Strickland, 1994) suggest that the question of theorising difference can be addressed by retaining a form of universalising that distinguishes between oppressive and non-oppressive theorising. However, other authors (Butler, 1992; Elam, 1994; Flax, 1990a, 1992b, 1993a; Yeatman, 1991) reject all forms of universal theorising and, in line with postmodernism, argue that formative metanarratives are not necessary for political action.

While acknowledging that there are some forms of postmodernism associated with "nihilistic relativism and anomie," Yeatman (1991, p. 8) argues that there is a strong relationship between modern traditions of emancipation and what she terms 'postmodern critical theorising'. Yeatman believes that this form of theorising is both possible and consistent with feminism's political agenda. She suggests that this politics "is reshaping and resituating emancipatory norms within a postmodern thematics" (p. 8).

Yeatman's (1991) argument is that postmodern politics must proceed without the same degree of certainty that has characterised modernist thinking. She argues that the concept of modern emancipation was designed to coexist with the universal subject of humanity and therefore with the rejection of the modern subject also comes the rejection of emancipatory politics as it has been known within modernism. Emancipation must be reworked and should now be considered as purely pragmatic and relevant only as it relates to discrete social movements (Yeatman, 1991). Therefore, for Yeatman, the

issues of voice and representation are central to postmodern emancipatory politics and it becomes necessary to understand how these movements represent themselves given that only those involved in a social movement can legitimately represent that movement. While different movements may come together at times, Yeatman argues that this process must be negotiated and their co-existence agreed upon.

Yeatman (1991) is disputing the modernist project of large-scale social change, instead arguing that change will only occur in local contexts involving “the opening up of a democratic politics of voice and representation, where the ideal state is not the overcoming of domination once and for all but ongoing imaginative and creative forms of positive resistance to various types of domination” (p. 8). She goes on to state:

The utopian aspect of postmodern imaginaries of self-determination lies not in that kind of rationalist millenarianism, but in the visionary aspects of particular, everyday struggles for social change. These cannot be totalised into the one big, great struggle, and, thus, the idea of a revolution loses congruency (*sic*). This does not preclude a revolutionary consciousness of seeking to build connections between the various struggles for self-determination, to explore their affinities, and to acknowledge their differences. (p. 6)

Elam (1994) introduces the notion of ‘solidarity’ as an alternative to ‘identity’ which she considers to be similar to “a coalition built around a suspicion of identity” (p. 69). She is attempting to find a term to indicate that political action is possible without compromising the importance of difference. Elam advances this concept of solidarity as “the essential grounding for meaningful political action” (p. 69). Elam accepts the importance of identity politics and the role that it plays in society, particularly within feminism, and she suggests that rather than being at odds with this notion, deconstruction will “help us to understand the limitations of playing the identity politics game, as well as open up possibilities for ways of doing politics differently.” (p. 72).

The notions of ‘identity’, ‘difference’ and ‘rights’ are central to Elam’s (1994) argument. Elam argues that identity is a production and not a stable, or natural entity. In the past, identity politics has relied on the existence of a unified subject (women as subject) which precludes an appreciation of differences amongst women. In addition, it is through an appeal to the discourse of rights that identity politics has sought legitimation. Elam is critical of the modernist feminist argument that “the deconstruction of the subject is a

luxury that feminism cannot politically afford: no subject means no identity, no identity means no identity politics, which means no feminism.” (p. 72).

Instead, Elam (1994) argues for a form of politics that is based on what she terms ‘the politics of the undecidable’ and which is characterised by the absence of the subject as its founding principle. She states:

This is a point worth explaining, because in claiming that the political is the realm of the undecidable, I am not trying to suggest that no political actions or decisions are possible. Rather, the political is best understood as the realm of continual negotiation, as a matter of negotiation in the absence of any accounting procedure. (p. 81)

Elam (1994) argues that when feminist politics is conceived in this way new opportunities for action are opened up, not through traditional understandings of agency or autonomy, but through coalitions, a sense of collective uncertainty, or what Elam terms ‘groundless solidarity’. For Elam this groundless solidarity is the encounter between politics and difference where differences are dealt with rather than subsumed and, she argues, this is far from the nihilistic view commonly associated with deconstruction. Therefore, Elam states:

Thus the understanding of politics as undecidable is not about refusing to make decisions: it is about refusing to ground decisions in universal laws. We might even go so far as to say that the politics of the undecidable is an insistence that we have to *make* a decision, each time, in each case – that we cannot avoid making a decision by just applying a pre-existing universal law. (p. 87)

Butler (1992) has also attempted to move through this difficult impasse between feminists who wish to maintain the category of women for its political possibilities and those who believe that one central category of women is defining of others (Seidman, 1994). Butler begins her argument from the position that feminism must be able to make claims in the name of women given that “lobbying efforts are virtually impossible without recourse to identity politics” (p. 15). However, she attempts to reconcile this with another issue, the need to describe the constituency referred to by the term ‘women’. She argues that every time specificity is attached to the category of women (i.e. women as childbearers) “there is resistance and factionalisation within the very constituency that is supposed to be *unified* by the articulation of its common element” (p. 15).

Butler (1992) argues that identity categories are never just descriptive but are inevitably exclusionary. This process of universalising will always result in factionalisation and

therefore “‘identity’ as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement” (Butler, p. 15). However, Butler does not suggest that the term ‘women’ should be abandoned but rather that it should be approached “as a site of multiple and contested meanings” (Seidman, 1994, p. 12) thereby making the term “a site of permanent openness and resignifiability” (Butler, p. 16). Butler goes on to argue:

I would argue that the rifts among women over the content of the term ought to be safeguarded and prized, indeed, that this constant rifting ought to be affirmed as the ungrounded ground of feminist theory. To deconstruct the subject of feminism is not, then, to censure its usage, but, on the contrary, to release the term into a future of multiple significations, to emancipate it from the maternal or racist ontologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear. (p. 16)

This position, therefore, takes into account both the need of feminism to work towards the empowerment of ‘all women’ and also the need to appreciate and value the multiple voices within the feminist movement (Seidman, 1994).

Flax (1992b) acknowledges that postmodern notions of deconstruction may not be appealing to feminism given that “women never fully experienced the benefits of bourgeois-liberal emancipation” (p. 195) and therefore the promises of the Enlightenment continue to hold hope for many feminists that women can be liberated within modernism. Flax argues that it is “reasonable for feminists to be sceptical about abandoning these practices before most women have fully enjoyed their admittedly limited and ambiguous benefits” (p. 196).

However, Flax (1993a) disputes the legitimacy of the standpoint perspective within feminism given that it requires a belief that one particular position that is, she suggests, contingent and constructed, can provide a more reliable position from which to view the world and reality. Further, she suggests that this perspective may “obscure our entanglement in a ‘discursive formation’ or episteme in which truth claims may take some forms and not others” (p. 143).

This relates to the postmodern position, previously articulated, that epistemologies require the suppression of dissenting and conflicting discourses. Flax (1990a) argues that within feminism such a totalising perspective will inevitably require the suppression of “the important and discomfiting voices of persons with experiences unlike our own” (p.

28). It is in this way that the appearance of unity is maintained (Flax, 1992b). As Flax (1990a) argues:

Perhaps reality can have “a” structure only from the falsely universalising perspective of the dominant group. That is, only to the extent that one person or group can dominate the whole will reality appear to be governed by one set of rules or be constituted by one privileged set of social relations. Criteria of theory construction such as parsimony or simplicity may be attained only by the suppression or denial of the experiences of other(s). (p. 28)

Flax (1993a) does not agree with modernist feminism’s claim that postmodernism is ‘depoliticising’. Instead she suggests that universality is an illusion that should be abandoned and she advocates the notion of ‘responsibility without grounds’ (Flax, 1993a). The relationship between truth, knowledge and change is central to Flax’s position. In order to legitimate a position, claims to its truthfulness are alleged in the belief that this will encourage others to support this position. Flax believes though, that this process only produces a form of ‘innocent truth’ which is not necessarily the only or the best way to ensure change. She states:

Political action and change require and call upon many human capacities including empathy, anger, and disgust. There is no evidence that appeals to reason, knowledge, or truth are uniquely effective or ought to occupy privileged positions in strategies for change. ... It is simply not necessarily the case (especially in politics) that appeals to truth move people to action, much less to justice. (p. 144)

Therefore, claims about change to injustices, to relations of domination, to forces of oppression in society can operate without reference to notions of truth or to “any corresponding counterclaim about a transcendental good or an ideal form of justice” (Flax, 1993a, p. 146). Rather, these claims are political and are assisted through the use of persuasive speech and action (Flax, 1993a). Therefore people need to “learn new ways of making claims about and acting upon injustice without transcendental guarantees or illusions of innocence” (Flax, p. 146).

One of Flax’s (1993a) primary criticisms of these transcendental guarantees is that they create a sense of irresponsibility from our actions so that through speaking in the name of ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ “we can avoid taking responsibility for locating our contingent selves as the producers of knowledge and truth claims” (p. 145). It is this process of taking responsibility for our truth claims that Flax considers to be the central issue in theorising in the face of difference:

To take responsibility is to situate ourselves firmly within contingent and imperfect contexts, to acknowledge differential privileges of race, gender, geographic location and sexual identities. Responsibility entails resisting the delusory and dangerous recurrent hope of redemption to a world not of our own making. We need to learn to make claims on our own and others' behalf and to listen to those that differ from ours. (p. 146)

3.6 Relevance to this Research

Feminist postmodern perspectives have become central to the overall argument and conclusions of this thesis. As previously discussed, this research is characterised by a shift in theorising from a modernist perspective where the desire to create a 'new' and 'true' theory was the primary aim, to a postmodern perspective which aims to embrace the complexities and contradictions in theorising.

In line with the early modernist ambitions of this thesis, the research methodology reflects my adoption of the standpoint perspective and the work of third world feminists such as Collins. However, the inadequacies of this perspective became apparent as I attempted to understand the encounters that I had with young people and youth workers in this research. I engaged with postmodern feminist authors as a way of furthering my understanding of the themes emerging from the research, most particularly the nature of truth and therefore the limitations and possibilities of theorising.

It became apparent to me that postmodern feminism was able to take the issues raised by third world feminism concerning difference, truth and theorising to a deeper level, through questioning not only those metanarratives that oppress but also the very process of constructing metanarratives as a useful tool in understanding. Importantly, postmodern feminists have preserved the notion of social critique and social action while exploring avenues for non-oppressive universalising and theorising; a central theme of this research.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on facets of the relationship between postmodernism and feminism. I have briefly presented concerns that modernist feminists have expressed about the postmodern position before going on to outline the postmodern feminist position, particularly as it relates to possibilities for theorising without universalising. It is this issue that has formed much of feminism's interest in postmodernism, whether as critique or as support. The issue of difference has historically been central to feminist concerns. Feminism has been interested in the ways in which women have been defined as 'the other,' as different from the 'male norm'. More recently, feminism has been confronted with the realisation that its own theorising has replicated the same oppressive patterns characteristic of patriarchal thought, by generalising to all women the experiences of some. Postmodernism shares many of these concerns and therefore it seems appropriate that these two discourses intersect.

Postmodern feminists are concerned with enhancing the political agenda of feminism through engagement with postmodern discourses. There is a wide range of perspectives within postmodern feminism about the most useful ways to negotiate between the political imperative in feminism and a postmodern sensitivity to foundational thought. Postmodern feminisms can be located in two primary groups – those which distinguish between oppressive and non-oppressive universalising and those which reject the idea that social action requires universal theorising. It appears though, that all postmodern feminists agree about the ongoing importance of these issues for feminism and postmodernism.

In addition to the issues discussed in this chapter, postmodern feminisms are also significantly concerned with subjectivity and the relationship between the humanist notion of the essential self and the postmodern view of the decentered self. In the following two chapters I provide an overview of the most influential perspectives in the understanding of subjectivity, including a detailed discussion of the postmodern feminist views of subjectivity.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUBJECTIVITY AND MODERNISM

4.1 Introduction

No one has ever seen the self. It has no visible shape, nor does it occupy measurable space. It is an abstraction, like other abstractions equally elusive: the individual, the mind, the society. (Howe, 1992, p. 249)

Explorations into the nature of the self have been a part of the history of civilisation (Sass, 1992). The issues involved in these examinations of self date back to ancient Greece “where it was given poignant expression in the Socratic requirement for the achievement of self-knowledge” (Schrag, 1997, p. 3). According to Sass, understanding the self has been the primary theme of Western culture for the past several centuries. During this time the history of Western societies can be seen as a “‘journey into the interior,’ marked by such events as the Renaissance ‘discovery’ of individuality and ‘the dignity of man,’ the Enlightenment assertion of human freedom and self-determination, the romantic glorification of inwardness and self-expression, and culminating in the dizzying involutions of modernism and postmodernism” (Sass, p. 18). In the twentieth century, issues of subjectivity have become relevant to scholars in a range of disciplines (sociology, anthropology, psychology), joining the traditional disciplines of philosophy and theology (Johnson, 1985).

Dominant in Western societies, the liberal humanist notion of subjectivity is based on a self which is unified, rational and self-determining (Giroux, 1991). More recently the notion of the self has entered a period of crisis (Craig, 1997; Levine, 1992). Craig suggests that “‘we’ are in trouble as far as thinking and talking about ourselves go” (p. 505). The impact of the Enlightenment self is so widespread that it is considered a ‘natural’ state of being. However, Mansfield (2000) argues that “this emphasis on the self as the origin of all experience and knowledge seems glaringly obvious to us, but this merely indicates how much we still live in the wake of the mutation in Western thinking that Descartes’ work represents” (p. 14).

Resulting primarily from the challenges of postmodernism, questions of individual agency and the dominance of the encompassing discourses of science and truth are central to this crisis. Schrag (1997) states:

Confronted with the mosaic of messages dealing with the death of man, the demise of the author, and the deconstruction or dissimulation of the subject, one finds oneself in a crisis of concepts relative to matters pertaining to the human self understood as subject and agent in discourse and action. (p. 3)

This chapter focuses on modernist perspectives of subjectivity. The first section explores modernist views of the self both historically and in terms of several important disciplines – psychology, sociology and anthropology. In the second section it is suggested that several key developments in modernism acted as precursors to the postmodern challenge to the modern subject – Marxism, Freud, structuralism and feminism.

The following chapter provides an outline of postmodern views of subjectivity and then focuses, in some detail, on the diversity of perspectives in postmodern feminist approaches to subjectivity. Both chapters pay particular attention to the construction of subjectivity and the question of agency.

4.2 Modernist Views of Self ¹

The modernist self ... is knowable, present in the here and now, just slightly below the surface of his (*sic*) actions. ... he is reliable and trustworthy. His word today is good tomorrow and the next. The modernist self is not likely to have his reason clouded by intense emotional dramas; his reasons guide his actions and his voice is clear and honest. ... Everyone is created equal, and it is up to us as parents and good citizens to mould the young. With proper moulding, and the help of science, we create the future of our dreams. (Gergen, 2000, p. 47)

Modern society is based on the notion of the individual as a free, autonomous, self-determining, creative self. The modernist view of subjectivity is characterised by a subject who is “autonomous, a free thinking rational being, in control of who and what they are, and fully cognisant of the reality they live within” (McLaughlin, 1997, p. 10).

Modernist society assumes the existence of an independent actor and this is the basic

¹ There seems little agreement among theorists about the precise periods of time covered by terms such as ‘modernism,’ the Enlightenment, or even the commencement of a period of ‘postmodernism’. For the purposes of this thesis emphasis will be placed on the social and cultural characteristics of these times, rather than their specificity in historical time. In general terms though, modernity will be considered to be the dominant social and cultural period in Western societies for the past 500 years (Sim, 2001) characterised by the Enlightenment era from the revolution in England in 1688 to the Second World War (Sim, 2001); during this time the Romanticist period from the French Revolution in 1789 to 1830 is also of significance (Gergen, 2000; Sim, 2001). The appearance of postmodernism is seen to commence after the Second World War, but more pronouncedly in the 1960s (Harvey, 1990).

component of modern society (Graham et al., 1992). The rational self of the modern world values reason and observation (Gergen, 2000). As Milovanovic (1995) points out:

Modernist thought has privileged the idea of the individual, a person that is assumed to be conscious, whole, self-directing, reflective, unitary, and transparent. (p. 26)

Modernism has constituted an era when “thinking and speaking have been governed by certain presumptions about unity, identity, duality, totality ... being, and presence” (Barratt, 1993, p. 2). Key to this period of time are 17th century philosophers such as Descartes and Newton, whose work is characterised by dualistic thinking which included separations such as mind/body, subject/object, public/private, sense/consciousness, space/time, etc. (Centore, 1991).

One of the central characteristics of the modern self is the emphasis placed on agency and autonomy (Barrett, 1993; Davies, 1991; Gergen, 2000; Henriques, Holloway, Urwin, Venn & Walkerdine, 1984; Howe, 1992; Lovibond, 1989). The argument that the “self should be mobilised as a mandate for action is part of the development of liberalism – both political and metaphysical – that comes to the fore in the late eighteenth century” (Howe, p. 253). Indeed, within humanism “agency is synonymous with being a person ...[and it] is used interchangeably with such concepts as freedom, autonomy, rationality and moral authority” (Davies, p. 42). Henriques et al. argue:

The humanist position tends to see the individual as the agent of all social phenomena and productions, including knowledge. The specific notion of the individual contained in this outlook is one of a unitary, essentially non-contradictory and above all rational entity. It is the Cartesian subject in modern form; a notion of the subject which has been central to the whole of western philosophy founded on the principle of the cognito. (p. 93)

The modern self proceeds on the quest for autonomy by conquering our own ignorance and social determinants therefore implying a transcendence given that pursuing “a fully integrated subjectivity takes the form of an attempt to rise above our present mental limitations” (Lovibond, 1989, p. 10).

4.2.1. Historical Progressions of the Modern Self

During the eighteenth century the project of modernity (Habermas, 1983 cited in Harvey, 1990) came to the fore. As Harvey explains:

The idea was to use the accumulation of knowledge generated by many individuals working freely and creatively for the pursuit of human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life. The scientific domination of nature promised freedom from scarcity, want, and the arbitrariness of natural calamity. The development of rational forms of social organisation and rational modes of thought promised liberation from the irrationalities of myth, religion, superstition, release from the arbitrary use of power as well as from the dark side of our own human natures. Only through such a project could the universal, eternal, and the immutable qualities of humanity be revealed. (p. 12)

There are two specific periods of time within the past five centuries that have been highly significant in the development of the modern view of the self – the Enlightenment and Romanticism.

4.2.1.1 The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment project... took it as axiomatic that there was only one possible answer to any question. From this it followed that the world could be controlled and rationally ordered if we could only picture and represent it rightly. But this presumed that there existed a single correct mode of representation which, if we could uncover it (and this was what scientific and mathematical endeavours were all about), would provide the means to Enlightenment ends. (Harvey, 1990, p. 27)

The Enlightenment was characterised by a break with religion, the Church and all forms of superstition. The importance of reason in the Enlightenment project is one of its most significant characteristics as “all received or traditional notions, and social relations, were to be made subject to the scrutiny of the public, and therefore, collective – or intersubjective – use of reason” (Sim, 2001, p. 239). Both political developments and progress in science bolstered the view of a world “radically improved, ordered, engineered, mastered” (Sim, p. 239).

During this time, traditional ideas about selfhood were no longer assured (Mansfield, 2000). In the Enlightenment period it was argued that “we are possessed of a free and autonomous individuality that is unique to us, and that develops as part of our spontaneous encounter with the world” (Mansfield, p. 11). It was during this period that the individual subject, ‘man’ as a rational being, came to the fore (Milovanovic, 1995). The emphasis on rationality meant that emotions were now considered dangerous as they interfered with the operation of reason and judgement.

Lovibond (1989) argues that it was during this time that ‘centered’ subjectivity created the hope of autonomy, or ‘positive liberty’:

... which results from the achievement of a state of mind in which the decisions or commands issued by the *true* subject (the subject *qua* exemplar of ideal coherence and stability) cannot be overturned by recalcitrant impulses or ‘passions’. To be free in this sense is to be emancipated from the influence of beliefs and desires which our critical judgement condemns as irrational. (p. 9)

This is evident in Barratt’s (1993) assertion that:

The notion of the subject’s alleged authority and mastery has been promulgated as the authority of a privileged (patriarchal) consciousness (as with Bacon and Descartes), later as the absolutism of a transcendent ego (as with Kant and his successors), and finally as the unchangeable totality of possible structures of communication and exchange (as with structuralism). (p. 4)

Three central figures have been identified in the development of the self during the period of the Enlightenment – Descartes, Rousseau and Kant (Mansfield, 2000). Descartes’ primary position was that given that the reality of thinking was unquestionable, the existence of the thinker was also undeniable (Gergen, 1971). Rousseau argued that humans were born perfect until society distorted individual growth and development (Mansfield, 2000). Rousseau argued for a particular view of the self which became dominant in modern life comprising “the idea that the individual is a naturally occurring unit, that it is preyed upon and entrapped by society, and that true freedom and fulfilment can only be gained by rejecting social pressures, and by giving individuality uninhibited expression” (Mansfield, p. 18).

Kant stressed the importance of self-awareness and the unity of the self as a prerequisite for our dealings with the world at large, stressing the importance of ‘thought’ in this process of self-awareness (Mansfield, 2000). As Mansfield suggests:

In fact, Kant would argue that before you can think the natural philosophy of a Rousseau, or the eternity of a religion, as with all ideas, impressions, impulses, representations and experiences, first you must think yourself. The self, then, is the feeling of connection or consistency between all your perceptions, the collection point of your thoughts. (p. 19)

Kant also stressed the importance of human agency and that through action a strong sense of unified selfhood is developed (Mansfield, 2000).

4.2.1.2 Romanticism

During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Romanticist view of the self developed. Romanticism challenged Enlightenment values of reason and observation (Gergen, 2000). During this time the focus came to be on the ‘deep interior’ and those elements of being that lay beneath consciousness (Gergen, 2000; Harvey, 1990). In this perspective “unseen, even sacred forces ... dwell deep within the person, forces that give life and relationships their significance” (Gergen, p. 19).

There were both religious and secular views of these forces. For Christians it was considered to be the soul which linked individuals to God; for secular thought it was a sense of passion that was both natural and dangerous (Gergen, 2000). Some joined these two perspectives to say that the soul and passion were one and the same, seeing passion as an expression of the soul (Gergen, 2000). In a sense, rational thought went against much of what was valued during this period.

The Romanticist period declined, primarily due to changes in the economy and the increasing dominancy of the market. However while the Romanticist view of the self was most dominant in the nineteenth century, it remains important in the modern world and is expressed through the valuing of a form of self that is moral, loyal, and experiences inner joy (Gergen, 2000).

4.2.1.3 Post-Romanticist Enlightenment

In more recent (post-Romanticist) times the social value of reason and observation was expressed through the scientific endeavour launching much of the social sciences, particularly psychology which now employed scientific processes to study the ‘mind’ (Gergen, 2000). Most characteristic of this period (1830-1950s) was the ‘grand narrative’ of modernism. As Gergen explains:

It is a story told by Western culture to itself about its journey through time, a story that makes this journey both intelligible and gratifying. The grand narrative is one of continuous upward movement – improvement, conquest, achievement – toward some goal. Science furnishes the guiding metaphor. Had science not demonstrated the capacity to defy gravity, extend the lifespan, harness nature’s energies, and carry voice and image through the stratosphere? Because of the individual’s capacities for reason and observation, as expressed in the scientific attitude, utopias were now within our grasp. (pp. 30-31)

Therefore if it is possible to achieve these things scientifically, through successive approximations, then the discovery of the essence of being should also be possible

(Gergen, 2000). This relates to society's attempts to find 'the truth', implicit in which is the belief that there is some object or thing that can be found, as Gergen calls it, "a fundamental *thing-in-itself*" (p. 33). Gergen goes on to say:

Science teaches that the world is composed of fixed and knowable entities. The same should be no less true of persons. For the romanticist the truly important features of the person lie beyond the bounds of observation and cannot be ensnared by simple practices of reason. For the modernist, however, "murky interiors" no longer compel. The person is there, open to observation ... and if you apply systematic powers of reason and observation you can know what sort of character you are dealing with. (pp. 38-39)

Modernism has threatened the Romantic view of the self, arguing that the characteristics of the self "reside not in the domain of depth, but rather in our ability to reason – in our beliefs, opinions, and conscious intentions" (Gergen, 2000, p. 6). However, both the Enlightenment and the Romanticist views of the self are eroding given the postmodern nature of society in which the very idea of "an 'authentic' self with knowable characteristics recedes from view" (Gergen, p. 7).

The Enlightenment of the twentieth century left many challenging the optimism associated with the quest for human emancipation. For example, as Harvey (1990) points out:

The twentieth century - with its death camps and death squads, its militarism and two world wars, its threat of nuclear annihilation and its experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – has certainly shattered this optimism. (p. 13)

The question of whether or not the Enlightenment was doomed to failure from its inception has been asked by authors such as Horkheimer and Adorno (1972, cited in Harvey 1990), who suggest that the quest for human emancipation became oppressive through the desire to oppress and control nature and through this oppression turning in on humanity itself (Harvey, 1990).

Sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists have studied the nature of the self and have argued for the construction of self in society based on a number of different determinants, however this theorising commonly retains the notion of a central and unitary self. The following sections provide a brief insight into some perspectives within each of these disciplines.

4.2.2 Psychology and the Self

The study of the self within modernism has become the domain of psychology (Buker, 1999) which arose from the philosophy of Berkeley, Hobbes, Hume and John Stuart Mill in the late 1800s (Gergen, 1971). As a result of modernity's "inability to penetrate, explain, and even modify the inner self", psychology has become "modernity's most popularised science"(Buker, p. 80). Through the application of scientific methods, psychology was to produce knowledge about human behaviour that would allow for both prediction and control (Polkinghorne, 1992). Underlying this mission was the belief that humans operated according to the same laws as the natural world and the appropriate method for uncovering these laws was the modernist process of hypothetical-deductive experiments (Polkinghorne, 1992). Chaiklin (1992) argues:

In particular, a modernist psychology is grounded in the assumptions that there is a formally structured universe that can be discovered through methods, particularly experimental ones, that will reveal true, universal laws, preferably of "formal-computational" or "hypothetical-deductive" variety, that are true for all times, places and persons. (p. 197)

The development of psychology reflects a move away from psychoanalysis' emphasis on problems being buried deep within the self, reflecting a belief in the rational aspects of being and therefore with a subsequent emphasis on cognitive and behavioural interventions (Gergen, 2000)².

Subjectivity in psychology has been most influenced by the work of William James who argued that there are three categories of self-experience – the 'material me' (physical body, family, home, possessions); the 'social me' (identity, awareness of other's perceptions); and the 'spiritual me' (awareness of thinking and feeling) (Gergen, 1971).

Within psychology, the self is seen as a person with continuous existence over time (Moore & Lemmon, 2001) and this continuity distinguishes one self from another (Harwood, 1998). The self is regarded as a unified entity characterised by an awareness of various states of consciousness and unconsciousness (Harwood, 1998). Importantly, the self is the source of agency and deliberate actions (Harwood, 1998). As Moore and Lemmon suggest:

Thus the person who performed certain activities and had certain experiences at particular moments in the past is understood to be, in an essential way, identical

² Therapeutic discourses continued to maintain the notion of essence however, with the suggestion that lack of essence meant lack of integration as a being and therefore a state of illness (Gergen, 2000). These issues are discussed further in Section 4.3.2 Freud and the Self.

with the person who is now acting or experiencing. Furthermore, this person will continue to be essentially identical to a person who will act and experience things in the future. (pp. 2-3)

Nelson (2001) poses the critical question for psychology in relation to the development of the self: “How does the child establish a sense of a continuing self that extends over time but that also changes over time and that is different in significant ways from others’ selves?” (pp. 15-16). She argues that the child must do two things in order for this to happen. She states:

First, the self must be recognised as continuous but also continually changing (experiencing, growing, learning). The challenge is to identify the psychological essence that continues and to distinguish it from what changes ... Second, the self must be recognised as unique and distinct from others, the same kind, but different in psychic essence, with separate and unique subjectivities. (p. 16)

Lovlie (1992) argues that there are two central aspects to the modern self which have formed the backbone of psychological work. Firstly, the principle of unity which implies that ‘I’ am in charge of ‘my’ life, or as Lovlie states, “[this is] the principle of the ‘one in the many’ ... the classical idea of unity or *logos*, which gathers, as it were, the particulars of my psyche under a common description” (p. 123). Secondly, is the principle of authenticity which states that what ‘I’ say is unquestionably true and accurate.

Several authors challenge the traditional assumptions of psychology’s subject from social constructionist and postmodernist perspectives (Gergen, 1985; Harre, 1984); Sampson, 1983, 1989). These perspectives within psychology argue that “selves, persons, psychological traits and so forth, including the very idea of individual psychological traits, are social and historical constructions, not naturally occurring objects” (Sampson, p. 2). Certainly the postmodern claim of the ‘death of the subject’ “eliminate[s] a basic presupposition of psychology and education: the idea of an autonomous and intentional agent (Lovlie, 1992, p. 120).

4.2.3 Sociology and the Self

Within the diversity of sociological theories, interpretive sociology includes perspectives such as symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, action theory and phenomenological sociology and provides a contrast to structural functionalism and conflict sociology (Haralambos & Holborn, 1991; Kasper, 1986; Wallace & Wolf, 1999). Despite many differences between interpretive sociology and other forms of

sociology, the model of human consciousness developed in this perspective is relevant to questions of subjectivity, given that functionalists and conflict sociologists tend to see humans as passive agents who are impacted on (positively or negatively) by social forces (Wallace & Wolf, 1999). Hence this section will focus solely on a brief overview of the self in interpretive sociology, particularly the work of George Herbert Mead.

The major thrust of the interpretivists' argument is that the individual, as the central figure in social reality, creates meaning for the phenomena in their surroundings (Kasper, 1986). As Kasper argues:

By reacting to an exterior world reflecting upon the meanings of phenomena in a physical and social world, wielding symbols and communication with others, the individual shares in constructing a social reality of which all individuals are a part. Society emerges from the repeated, meaningful acts of many individuals who find themselves in a shared environment. (p. 31)

These meaning-making actions on the part of individuals create social institutions and therefore may also be able to change them through the "slow, subtle, but powerful accumulation of changing individual beliefs and behaviours which can modify the seemingly fixed institutions of social life" (Kasper, 1986, p. 31). Each individual contributes to the flexible and changing nature of society (Kasper, 1986).

In terms of the development of the self over time, interpretive sociologists argue that this occurs through observing the behaviour of others who share the same reality, creating an interplay where some meanings are rejected or replaced and some assimilated (Kasper, 1986). Therefore, the self comes to be in the "social process where the individual shares the perspective of others while simultaneously developing a sense of self" (Kasper, p. 32).

Schutz (1972) argues that experience has no meaning in itself but rather that meaning is ascribed by the self through the process of reflection. Schutz distinguishes between a form of consciousness which is non-reflective, and therefore more primitive; and a consciousness which is reflective and therefore able to confer meaning. The result, according to Kasper (1986), is an "individual's reference schema, a series of stored clusters of meaning against which the individual can compare and evaluate the unsecured, new experiences of the moment"(p. 32).

Within symbolic interactionism it is George Herbert Mead's view of the self which is central. Mead "sees the self as an acting organism, not as a passive receptacle that simply receives and responds to stimuli" (Wallace & Wolf, 1999, p. 197). Mead argued that the "attainment of language involves the acquired ability to emit signs that the emitter interprets in the same way as the receiver: 'significant symbols'" (Smith, 1985, p. 63). Mead considered reflection as a process of self-indication where individuals distinguish between those objects that are important for them and their behaviours and beliefs. Therefore, the ability to develop "a concept of self lies in the ability to take the role of another" (Haralambos & Holborn, 1991, p. 800).

It is Mead's concept of the 'generalised other' which has most influenced the question of subjectivity in sociology. The 'generalised other' "is the result of the individual's ability to retain a core self, unique and spontaneous, while progressively taking on and internalising the standard meanings of the group" (Kasper, 1986, p. 33).

Within this construction of self is a balance between what is known of the self and what has been internalised from the social world (Kasper, 1986). As Kasper notes:

The ability, then, of the individual to see herself as an object in the social world, to internalise selectively the behaviours and beliefs of others while retaining a core sense of self, and the increasing potential to know oneself while balancing, sharing, and comparing one's beliefs and behaviours with the exigencies of a social world in which human interaction predominates constitutes the interpretive definition of self as acquired through socialisation. (p. 33)

Mead's conclusion to the way in which a self is constituted is that it is made up of two parts – the personality of the individual which is the 'I', and the internalised attitudes of others which is the 'Me' (Haralambos & Holborn, 1991; Kasper, 1986; Smith, 1985). When both the 'I' and the 'Me' are united, the individual has reached full development as a person (Kasper, 1986). While some interpretive sociologists allow for small degrees of tension between the two parts (cultural and experiential meanings), Mead rejects this suggestion and, according to Kasper, argues instead that "the mesh of culturally-given and experientially-acquired types of meaning enable individuals to plan, choose, and take action in the ongoing process of social life (p. 37). Therefore, Mead argues, the self is constituted through the internalisation of the social (Marshall, 1994).

According to social interactionalists such as Mead and Berger, “the self is a ‘creation,’ like any other symbolic object; that it is a social, communicative construction interactionally emerging through a symbolic process” (Johnson, 1985, p. 95).

4.2.4 Anthropology and the Self

What we think of as our human character is not inborn; it must be acquired through learning. The truly human in us, as anthropology sees it, is primarily created through our engagement with the social and cultural world; it is neither exclusively individual nor natural. All behaviour has a social origin; how we dress (for that matter, the mere fact that we dress), how we communicate through language, gestures and facial expressions, what we eat and how we eat – all of these capabilities, so self-evident that we tend to think of them as natural, are acquired. (Eriksen, 2001, p. 40)

Unlike sociology and psychology, anthropology’s contribution to the question of subjectivity has been indirect, deriving from extensive ethnographic fieldwork over many years (Johnson, 1985). In exploring human diversity “anthropologists have provided a counterpoint to clinical and research studies conducted by psychologists which have sought to define prototypical and universal personality elements which transcend cultures, nations and eras” (Johnson, p. 102). One of the most crucial insights of anthropology is that human beings are social products. Comparative research has also indicated that the conception of ‘self’ is important in all human societies (Eriksen, 2001).

The diversity of perspectives within anthropology is significant. In a general sense, two main perspectives can be distinguished – physical or biological anthropology which focuses primarily on the nature of evolution; and cultural or social anthropology which explores the relationship between people and culture. Cultural anthropology is interested in finding the connections between various aspects of existence in a particular society and also connections between different societies (Eriksen, 2001). Aspects of cultural anthropology, such as historical particularism, culture and personality movement, symbolic and interpretive anthropology, feminism, and postmodernism, are concerned, directly or indirectly, with the nature of subjectivity and are the focus of this brief section.

The work of anthropologist Franz Boas acts as the precursor to many other anthropologists who have developed insights into the nature of subjectivity. Boas’ work was significant in advancing the idea of cultural relativism (Cerroni-Long, 1999;

Eriksen, 2001; McGee & Warms, 1996) and its importance to anthropology by suggesting that “cultural traits can only be understood relative to the cultural context in which they are observed” (Cerroni-Long, p. 6) and that it would be “scientifically misleading to judge and rank other cultures according to a Western, ethnocentric typology gauging ‘levels of development’” (Eriksen, p. 14). As McGee and Warms argue:

Whereas cultural evolutionists argued that technologically simple societies were inferior to Western civilization, Boas countered that societies were unique entities that could not be compared. Cultural traits of a society were the result of the historical and environmental evolution of that society and could only be understood within that context. Consequently, terms such as *primitive*, *inferior*, and *superior* did not have cross cultural validity. (p. 129)

Therefore, Boas was interested in the specific histories of each society, a form of historical particularism where “all societies or cultures had their own, unique history that could not be reduced to a category in some universalist scheme of development” (Eriksen, 2001, p. 14). Historical particularism “adopted a holistic approach that included studying prehistory, linguistics, and physical anthropology” (McGee & Warms, 1996, p. 129). McGee and Warms go on to state:

The hallmark of historical particularism became the intensive study of specific cultures through long periods of fieldwork. Boas argued that it was only through living with a people and learning their language that one could develop an accurate understanding of a culture. (p. 129)

Following on from Boas the work of Benedict, Mead, Wharf, Safir, and Geertz have all been significant in anthropology’s concern with the subject. Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead founded the culture and personality movement based on a combination of Boas’ work and Gestalt psychology, which emphasises the personality as an interrelated pattern (McGee & Warms, 1996). Both Mead and Benedict were interested in the relationship between culture and personality and the ways in which certain cultures influenced the development of personality (McGee & Warms, 1996).

One of the very significant developments in anthropology arose from the work of two theorists – Whorf and Safir. Continuing on with the tradition of cultural relativism advanced by Boas, and combining it with semiotics, Whorf and Safir proposed that there is “an intimate connection between the categories and structure of a language and the ways in which humans are able to experience the world” (Eriksen, 2001, p. 227). As a result, “the language of a people will therefore be a significant source of knowledge

about their mode of thought, their cosmology and their everyday life (Eriksen, p. 228).

Johnson (1985) states:

In its documentation of cultural relativism, anthropology has laid bare the extensiveness of variation based upon custom, language, kinship, belief systems, etc. Paradigmatically stated in the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, this variation has revealed significant differences in the subjective experience of self contingent on culturally specified norms and socialisation practices affecting perception, cognition, communication, and action. (p. 103)

Related to this is symbolic and interpretive anthropology based on the combination of cultural relativism and linguistics (Eriksen, 2001). Geertz argued that culture “was not a model inside people’s head but rather was embodied in public symbols and actions” (McGee & Warms, 1996, p. 430). Geertz has been interested in the way in which anthropologists produce anthropological texts, not to dismiss their significance, but to encourage a more professional reading (Eriksen, 2001). As Eriksen notes:

Far from being neutral and objective descriptions and analyses of customs and cultural systems, anthropological writings are shaped by each author’s biography, literary style and rhetoric; as well as by the historical period in which they were written ... and, of course, by the character of the fieldwork. (p. 33)

Geertz (1979) is considered the leading proponent of the interpretive, hermeneutic method in anthropology and one of the inspirations for postmodern approaches to anthropology (Eriksen, 2001). Geertz argues:

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organised into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures. (p. 229)

The work of Boas, Mead, Benedict, Whorf, Sapir and Geertz has been significant in highlighting the construction of subjectivity, particularly the importance of language in this process.

4.3 Precursors to Postmodernism

In this section it is argued that several key developments within modernism created the possibilities of the postmodern challenge to the centred self. Nietzsche’s claim of the ‘death of man’ and Levi-Strauss’ assertion of the ‘death of the subject’ were significant in the anti-humanist movement (Henriques et al., 1984). In this section I will explore

four of the primary and most immediate challenges to modernist views of the subject - the works of both Marx and Freud, structuralism, and feminism.

All these modes of thought have challenged the modernist view of a unified self. Smith (1987) argues that both Marx and Freud have demonstrated “the inadequacy of any epistemology which would establish some kind of sovereignty for the ‘subject’” (p. xxviii). Similarly, both structuralism, through its attention to language and representation (Harvey, 1990), and feminism, through its challenge to the gendered nature of human nature, have both played a role in challenging the construction of modern subjectivity.

4.3.1 Marxism and Subjectivity

For Marx the question of human nature, or the nature of self, was fundamental to his attempts to develop a theory capable of transforming modern society. Eagleton (2000) argues that Marx’s work aims to “identify, and work to dismantle, the major social contradictions which at present prevent us from living what he would see as a truly human life, in all the wealth of our bodily and spiritual powers” (p. 290). Similarly, Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (1986) state that Marx’s purpose was to “create social arrangements – socialism – which encouraged the full development and exercise of human capacities” (p. 10).

There is no question that Marx believed in an essential human nature and that “the just society would be one in which this nature was allowed to come out into its own” (Eagleton, 2000, p. 277). However, it has also been suggested (Delanty, 2000) that Marx’s theory of the self reflects a postmodern theme. According to Delanty, Marx promotes a decentered self which is “an essentially relational definition of subjectivity, as well as one that points to its creative potential” (p. 20).

Marx was interested in a form of theory that both understands and changes (Eagleton, 2000; Worsley, 1982). Historical materialism entails a view where reality is created both within and outside the subject (Held, 1980). Therefore, through “practice and labour the human species synthesises and alters the material world and thereby transforms nature *qua* known as well as itself” (Held, p. 190). This also relates to Marx’s notion of praxis where reality is constructed by practice (Held, 1980). For Marx, the essence of humanity is change (Eagleton, 2000). As Abercrombie et al. (1986) note:

... Marx saw human individuals as agents who, in transforming their environment, necessarily transform themselves. But this individual development as conscious and practical agents is set in the context of the *social* character of human reality. (p. 7)

Marx used the term ‘species-being’ to refer to ‘the shared form of material nature’ between all human beings which depicts his perspective that we are social beings who are dependent upon each other for all aspects of our survival (Abercrombie et al., 1986; Eagleton, 2000; Worsley, 1982). According to Delanty (2000) Marx believed that “the self is a collective social actor who must be historically constituted” (p. 16).

Marx felt strongly about constructing a society which would allow for the free development of each individual’s personality without constraint. Marx’s argument for a society where labour was automated is based on his view that then individuals, who are much more than simply tools of production, would be free to develop their personalities fully (Eagleton, 2000). Eagleton goes on to state:

We are free when, like artists, we produce without the goad of physical necessity; and it is this nature which for Marx is the essence of all individuals. In developing my own individual personality through fashioning a world, I am also realising what it is that I have most deeply in common with others, so that individual and species-being are ultimately one. My product is my existence for the other, and presupposes the other’s existence for me. This for Marx is an ontological truth, which follows from the kind of creatures we are. (p. 285)

Modernism for Marx was a radical project of social action (Delanty, 2000). The Marxist critique shifts the focus from epistemological and philosophical issues to “the social relations of capitalism and its system of domination” (Delanty, p. 16). For Marx then, communism was a form of social organisation that would allow such individual and collective freedom. Eagleton (2000) states:

For men and women to have their world, their sensuous bodies, their life-activity and their being-in-common restored to them is what Marx means by communism. Communism is just the kind of political set-up which would allow us to reappropriate our confiscated being, those powers alienated from us under class society. If the means of production were to be communally owned and democratically controlled, then the world we create together would belong to us in common, and the self-production of each could become part of the self-realisation of all. (p. 289)

While there are parts of symbolic interactionism that Marx also agrees with (Mead and the construction of subjectivity through internalising the social), Marx adds the dimension of domination and power to this picture (Marshall, 1994).

Marshall (1994) states that the Marxist position on the subject has commonly been critiqued and addressing the nature of subjectivity is one of the most serious challenges for Marxism. The primary point here is Marx's emphasis on production as the key in the construction of subjectivity. As Marshall states:

Specifically, there is increasing doubt cast on the premise of orthodox Marxist theory that an individual's identity, consciousness, and in essence, social being, are derived from one's position in the social division of labour. (p. 96)

Marshall (1994) argues that by "focusing on the reproduction of domination at the level of the system, Marxism failed to comprehend the significance of the reproduction of domination at the level of individual subjectivities" (p. 97).

Marshall (1994) advocates a re-examination of Marx's emphasis on 'sensuous human activity' without the subsequent focus on production and instead a move towards intersubjectivity so that what is valued is relationships between subjects rather than between subjects and objects. She suggests that Habermas has also focused on this by displacing production for an emphasis on communicative action.

Smith (1987) argues that Marx attempted to challenge the Hegelian position and "reclaim the ontological primacy of the material world" (p. xxviii). As Marshall (1994) notes:

From Hegel, through Marx and the early Frankfurt School, to work by Habermas, some notion of the "autonomous ego"- the fully individuated and somehow disembodied subject – has been the presupposition of any theory of resistance. (p. 101)

4.3.2 Freud and Subjectivity

Freud rejected humanism and challenged the knowing subject with the introduction of the notion of the unconscious and the consequent decentering of rationality (Henriques et al., 1984; Smith, 1987). It has been suggested (Barratt, 1993) that Freud's writings and the development of psychoanalysis was significant in that it introduced a "method of discourse demonstrating the interminable falsity of the human subject's belief in the mastery of its own mental life" (p. 1). Barratt further suggests that this discovery challenges the basis of Western thinking for centuries:

The revolutionary message is, I believe, the inescapable implication of Freud's discovery of the "repressed unconscious" – the discovery that all thinking and speaking, the production and reproduction of psychic reality, is inherently dynamic, polysemous, and contradictious. As polysemous, consciousness always means more than it thinks it means, and as contradictious the

movement of these “otherwise” meanings always subverts what consciousness thinks it means. (Barratt, 1993, p. 1)

According to Freud, subjectivity develops as a result of early experiences (gender, bodies) and interactions with others (parents, family), rather than being something that people are born with (Mansfield, 2000). Freud’s suggestion that subjectivity is produced through specific relationships characteristic of society, especially within the family, challenges the notion of an essential self existing regardless of historical or social conditions (Mansfield, 2000). The argument proceeds that this encounter “triggers a crisis that awakens our interior life, allowing us to feel we are separate from those around us, and gives rise to a complex, dynamic and sometimes obscure psychological structure – in short, the splitting of the subject into conscious and unconscious” (Mansfield, p. 8).

Freud was very significant in the period between Romanticism and modernism because of his ability to unify these discourses (Gergen, 2000). Cultural life during this period prepared the ground for the development of Freud’s theory. As Mansfield (2000) notes “the appearance of Freud’s writings at the very end of the nineteenth century and in the first few decades of the twentieth merely systematises a version of the self that had been accumulating for some time. The idea of the split subject was an idea whose time had come” (p. 26). In this sense, Freud marked a turn away from “Descartes’ identification of the self with the rational processes of the conscious mind” (Mansfield, p. 26).

Mansfield continues:

... if you look at the Freudian version of the subject topographically, we have an interior life split between the socially and culturally integrated processes of the conscious mind, and the threatening or unconfessable impulses of the unconscious, which the conscious hopes to keep in its place by a quantum of mental force called repression. (p. 30)

Barratt (1993) argues that psychoanalysis resulted in the emergence of postmodernism by highlighting the limitations of modernism. Freud questioned the existence of the modern subject and instead proposed a subject who is decentered, fragmented, and heterogenous and often unaware of conscious processes (Flax, 1990a; Rosenau, 1992). As Rosenau points out, “his was not a ‘knowing’ subject but rather a psychoanalytic subject better characterised by multiplicity, disunity, and self-deception than anything else” (p. 45). Delanty (2000) also argues this point:

In demonstrating that beneath the rational consciousness and the unity and coherence of personality are the deep irrational forces of the unconsciousness

where the prehistorical conflicts of civilization are played out, he effectively undermined one of the major premises of the Enlightenment, namely the coherence and unity of the self, which is seen as a struggle between the ego and the id. (p. 24)

However, despite attempts by postmodernists to establish Freudian theory as postmodernist (Rosenau, 1992), Freud's work is entrenched in the dominant paradigms of modernism (Barratt, 1993). At the very least, Freud did not advocate the abandonment of the subject (Rosenau, 1992). This is not to deny however, the ways in which Freud stands apart from modernism and is in direct opposition, for example, to traditional/ modernist psychology (Henriques et al., 1984).

Flax (1990a) suggests that the key is to acknowledge the contradictions in Freud's work rather than attempt to resolve them:

Freud's work is paradoxical because it culminates and defends major tendencies within Enlightenment thinking, especially its individualism, empiricism, and rationalism. Yet at the same time his theories undermine the very epistemological and psychological aspects of Enlightenment thought he attempts to rescue. (p. 17)

4.3.3 Structuralism and Language

Twentieth century thought has elevated the importance of language in the construction of subjectivity in such a way that "it is hard to overstate the importance to the modern era of the idea that language defines human life" (Mansfield, 2000, p. 38). Mansfield argues:

It is not that subjects exist in the world and then use language as their tool. This may seem at first glance a logical explanation for how language came into being in the first place, but it does not represent the relationship we have with language as individual subjects. The sequence is, in fact, reversed. Language existed before any of us was born, and we must locate ourselves in the field of language in order to take up a place in the human world. (p. 39)

Saussure's structuralist theory of language, developed in 1911, heralded a new understanding of the role of language in the construction of meaning (Harvey, 1990). In essence, Saussure asserted that the modernist belief that what was spoken reflects an independent reality is misguided (Lovlie, 1992). He critically questioned the prevailing view that the relationship between signs, or the relationship between signifier and signified is fixed in a logical manner (Lovlie, 1992). Rather, the meaning of words is given through their relationship to other words, rather than through their reference to any object (Harvey, 1990).

Saussure was interested in finding the deep structure within language that allowed it to perform its function (Sim, 2001). He saw language “as a system of interlinked units, each of which had a meaning only in relation to the system as a whole” (Sim, p. 365). Saussure saw this system of signs as being made up of a signifier or mental component (concept) and a signified or physical component (sound or mark on paper) (Sim, 2001). He argued that the deep structures within language “are independent of the human agents who use language, and this displacement of the human subject from the focus of interest is one of the characteristics of structuralism” (Sim, p. 365).

For Saussure language is a complex cultural order, “a concrete system of conventions built around two relationships: the difference between one signifier and another and the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified” (Mansfield, 2000, p. 40).

Saussure has influenced many prominent thinkers including Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Lacan and Derrida (Mansfield, 2000). Poststructuralists such as Lacan and Derrida have been critical of structural linguistics and have suggested that it is not possible to stand outside language; rather, Lacan argues that we are immersed in language and cannot escape from it (Sarup, 1993).

Poststructuralism also challenges the structuralist notion that the link between the signifier and the signified is purely arbitrary, arguing that “words always refer to other words: signifiers form a chain along which we slip without ever reaching a fixed or definite meaning” (Sim, 2001, p. 300). The relationship between signifier and signified is not a stable or predictable one for poststructuralists (Sarup, 1993). As Sarup argues:

Like Derrida, Lacan insists upon the commutability of the signified, upon the capacity of every signified to function in turn as a signifier. A consequence of the non-representational status of language, is of course, that the signified is always provisional. (p. 10)

4.3.4 Feminisms and the Self

Feminisms³ have been major contributors to the crisis of representation in late twentieth century modernism, having exposed the essentialist theorising of modern patriarchy and subsequently, the gendered nature of the modern subject (Bordo, 1990; Flax, 1983;

³ The scope of this section does not allow an in-depth exploration of the different feminist positions on this issue; however, the position reflected here is that held by the majority of contemporary (modern) feminisms.

Fraser & Nicholson, 1990; Harding, 1990; Hekman, 1990, 1991; Nielsen, 1990). The relationship between modern constructions of subjectivity and structures of domination and oppression in society has been at the forefront of modernist feminist theorising (Birke, 1986; Bleier, 1984; Grimshaw, 1986; Hekman, 1990, 1991; Hubbard, 1983; Lowe, 1983). In these ways, feminism is one of the enabling conditions leading to postmodernism (Sarup, 1993).

Modern feminists explored arguments about human nature and biological differences between the sexes and asserted that they were used to justify oppressive practices towards women⁴ (Birke, 1986; Bleier, 1984; Crosby, 1992; Grimshaw, 1986; Hubbard, 1983; Lowe, 1983). These feminists argued for the social construction of human nature, suggesting that theories that employ biological determinist arguments about human nature to justify oppressive social practices serve a primary purpose, that is, “to legitimate existing inequalities by naturalising them” (Birke, p. 39).

Hekman (1991) argues that feminism’s first attempt to critique the subject involved opening the subject up to include women rather than attempts to reconstitute the subject. Given that throughout history women have been defined as objects and men as subjects, feminists were concerned to expose the masculinity of the subject and address the issue of exclusion by incorporating women as subjects (Hekman, 1990). Significant here is the early work of de Beauvoir who believed the subject to be rational and autonomous and promoted the view that “women can and should become subjects, that they should embrace the masculine subjectivity of modernity” (Hekman, 1991, p. 46).

Identity was reconceptualised so that women’s identity was no longer a pre-given; instead women came to see themselves as ‘the other’ and assumed a common identity (Crosby, 1992). Identity within feminism has been inseparable from the concept of difference; “to be woman is to be different from man, from normative masculinity” (Crosby, p. 132). Difference has been the issue that women have fought against (the notion that women are different and therefore inferior) and at the same time, it is the issue that has united women for change (Rhode, 1990).

⁴ There is a widespread recognition in feminisms that this argument is also valid for other social issues – racism, homophobia, able-bodiedness, etc.

The ways in which difference has been used to exclude women in patriarchal society led to the feminist critiques of traditional paradigms and modernist epistemologies. These critiques aimed to expose “the contingent, partial, and historically situated character of what has passed in the mainstream for necessary, universal, and ahistorical truths (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990, p. 26). As Bordo (1990) notes:

Feminism, appropriately enough, initiated the cultural work of exposing and articulating the *gendered* nature of history, culture, and society. It was a cultural moment of revelation and relief. The category of the “human” – a standard against which all difference translates to lack, insufficiency – was brought down to earth, given a pair of pants, and reminded that it was not the only player in town. (p. 137)

The impact of feminism’s challenge to male-normative theories was felt through all disciplines, especially areas such as philosophy which had been built on the notions of universal truth and reason; “a reason without race, class, gender, or history” (Bordo, 1990, p. 137). For feminists it was not simply that universal theorising and the ensuing claims have excluded women but that “even the ideals which have given backing to these claims, such as ‘objectivity’ and ‘reason’, have reflected the values of masculinity at a particular point in history” (Nicholson, 1990, p. 5).

While modernist feminist theorising has critiqued metanarratives, the commitment to political practice has meant that some modernist feminists have at times adopted similar approaches to their own theorising as a way of explaining, and changing, the position of women in society (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990). As Fraser and Nicholson point out, these approaches do not assume the same qualities as pure metanarratives yet they still retain essentialist values. Bordo (1990) makes the point that although feminist theories have suffered from class, racial and other biases, this does not negate that feminism has been “a movement born out of the experience of marginality [and] has been unusually attuned to issues of exclusion and invisibility” (p. 141).

However, concerns emerged within feminism from women who did not feel included in this common identity, such as women of colour and lesbian women. (Crowley & Himmelweit, 1992; Gunew & Yeatman, 1993; Spelman, 1988; Tong, 1989). This challenge resulted in a criticism of feminism for presuming to represent universal women’s issues without recognition of the historical and social interests of their specific claims (Crowley & Himmelweit, 1992). As Bordo (1990) argues, gender “forms only

one axis of a complex, heterogeneous construction, constantly interpenetrating, in historically specific ways, with multiple other axes of identity” (p. 139).

Modernist feminist theories were accused of being “insufficiently attentive to historical and cultural diversity, and they falsely universalise features of the theorist’s own era, society, culture, class, sexual orientation, and ethnic, or racial group” (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990, p. 27). In fact, Fraser and Nicholson argue that these “quasi-metanarratives hamper rather than promote sisterhood, since they elide differences among women and among forms of sexism to which different women are differentially subject” (p. 33). Bordo (1990) notes that the unity of the ‘gendered human’ argued for by feminism ended up being “as much a fiction as the unity of the abstract, universal ‘man’” (p. 137). Gunew and Yeatman (1993) observe:

Whenever such thinking prevails, we are merely in the business of juggling with traditional categories, privileging women rather than men, or some women at the expense of others, without changing the power structures behind such constructions. Such logic is homogenising and universalist, built on the principle of exclusion and the tyranny of the familiar. (p. xiii)

These challenges within feminism have resulted in the development of significant insights into the ways in which difference can be incorporated into theorising and movements for change. These insights have been formative in the development of postmodern feminist approaches. As Alcoff (1997) suggests:

The feminist turn toward postmodernism was motivated precisely out of a felt need for a deeper methodological critique of the roots of sexism and patriarchal assumptions in all existing domains of knowledge than an experiential-based feminism could provide. (p. 11)

4.4 Relevance for this Research

Modernist views of subjectivity have had a pervasive effect on social theory, impacting on the issues explored and the ways in which these issues have been thought about. This thesis is concerned with subjectivity and the relationship between the individual and the social. Many of the underlying assumptions and concerns of this thesis can be found in the modernist project of emancipation. However, this research is also an attempt to critique modernist subjectivity in line with the concerns already expressed by postmodern feminism and postmodernism more broadly.

The primary relevance for this research of modernist perspectives on subjectivity relates to the concluding arguments presented in this thesis where remnants of the humanist self interact with the postmodern focus on multiplicity and difference.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored modernist views of subjectivity both in an historical context and in examination of the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and anthropology. The nature of the self has been an enduring concern throughout the ages. Disciplines in the social and human sciences, as well as philosophy and theology, have built their foundations on the quest to understand the nature and essence of being human. The modern self incorporates elements of both Enlightenment thought and Romanticism, culminating in a self who is autonomous, rational, passionate and moral. The existence of the modern self is considered part of human nature, given how deeply ingrained this concept is in Western society.

Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries however, the order of representation was challenged and the rational self began to be exposed as a construction, whether through language, gender, production, or the forces of the unconscious. This historical movement paved the way for the most serious threat to the modern self – postmodernism. In the following chapter postmodern perspectives on subjectivity are explored. In particular, the diversity of perspectives in postmodern feminist views of subjectivity are introduced.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUBJECTIVITY AND POSTMODERNISM

5.1 Introduction

In a move away from the centred subject of modernity, postmodernists advocate the decentered subject and reject humanist appeals to a universal subjectivity or human condition (Giroux, 1991; Lovlie, 1992; Milovanovic, 1995; Rosenau, 1992; Sarup, 1993; Strickland, 1994) arguing that subjectivity is an effect of discourse and not an unchanging and objective entity (Davies, 1991; Flax 1993a; Giroux, 1991; Hekman, 1991; Lupton, 1998; Marshall, 1994; Milovanovic, 1995; Weedon, 1987). Postmodernism signals the death of humanism (Lash, 1992) and the death of the subject (Flax, 1993a; Lovlie, 1992).

Some feminists have responded to the challenges of postmodernism by rejecting its core ideas, while others have attempted to incorporate postmodernism into feminist theory. Postmodern perspectives challenge many of the core assumptions of feminism. The very category of gender is in question given the postmodern rejection of the fixed subject, as is the significance of political action and agency, which is pivotal to feminism (Francis, 2002). Postmodern feminism has attempted to incorporate the challenges of postmodernism while retaining the core values of feminism (Alcoff, 1988; de Lauretis, 1984; Flax, 1990a, 1990b, 1993a, 1993b; Hekman, 1990, 1991, 1999; Kristeva, 1984; McLaughlin, 1997).

Continuing on from chapter four, this chapter addresses issues of subjectivity with a focus on postmodern views and with particular attention to the construction of subjectivity and the role of agency. A major purpose of this chapter, however, is to introduce postmodern feminist perspectives of subjectivity. These will be dealt with in some depth in the second section of the chapter. Postmodern feminist perspectives on subjectivity will inform the arguments developed following discussion of my research with young people and youth workers.

5.2 Postmodern Views of Subjectivity

5.2.1 Introduction

Poststructuralist theories reject the concept of the humanist subject, whose essential core is repressed by society and who lies in wait of our peeling back of culture to find it. (Marshall, 1994, p. 108)

Postmodern critiques of the humanist subject, and the suggestion that subjectivity is both discursive and multiple, are considered to be some of the most critical theoretical and political advances of postmodernism (Chester & Segura, 1997; Giroux, 1991; Lovlie, 1992). Postmodern thought has created “a renewed interest in questions about who we are and promises some escape from metaphysical certainty about ‘I’” (Craig, 1997, p. 506).

Postmodern positions are relativist and challenge all notions of certainty including ideas of truth, justice and the idea of a coherent or authentic self (Francis, 2002). The postmodern challenge to the foundational self is based in the challenge to Enlightenment thought and specifically in relation to the notion of essentialism.

Postmodernists consider subjectivity to be part of the pragmatic approach characteristic of the Enlightenment (Chester & Segura, 1997). The individual subject in modernism is the foundation for other ‘modern myths’ such as democracy, representation and emancipation (Chester & Segura, 1997). Without the concept of the subject, postmodernists argue that civil society can no longer exist; the death of the subject requires the abandonment of political discourse and agency in all its forms – determinism, progress, liberation, and emancipation (Chester & Segura, 1997).

Postmodern perspectives challenge deeply held beliefs about the self which have developed over the years of modernism. As Gergen (2000) notes, it is not simply that postmodernism suggests an alternate view of the self, it is that “the very concept of personal essences is thrown into doubt ... [and] selves as possessors of real and identifiable characteristics – such as rationality, emotion, inspiration, and will – are dismantled” (p. 7). Therefore postmodernists do not have a theory of the self, but instead seek to dissolve the very concept of self (Sarup, 1993).¹ As Davies (1991) explains:

¹ It is recognised that the primary exception to this is Lacan who has retained an interest in the subject.

In this model our existence as persons has no fundamental essence, we can only ever speak ourselves or be spoken into existence within the terms of available discourses. We are thus multiple rather than unitary beings and our patterns of desire that we took to be fundamental indicators of our essential selves (such as the desire for freedom or autonomy or for moral rightness) signify little more than the discourses, and the subject positions made available within them, to which we may have access. (p. 42)

This section provides a brief overview of postmodern positions on subjectivity. There is, of course, considerable diversity in postmodernism and this is evident in the degree to which postmodernists consider subjectivity to be an outmoded concept. At times throughout this section the terms ‘affirmative/weak’ and ‘skeptical/strong’ will be used to provide some distinction among postmodern positions.

5.2.2 Postmodernism and the Subject

In postmodernism, the notion of the fragmented self is privileged over the concept of the unified self of humanist thought, therefore rejecting “the notion that there is such a thing as a ‘true’ or ‘false’ self that exists separately from social and cultural processes” (Lupton, 1998, p. 28). In place of the unified self, postmodernists advocate the decentered subject characterised by being less unified and more determined rather than determining (Milovanovic, 1995, p. 26). In this sense, subjectivities are fluid and changing, reflecting social discourse and ideologies (Wearing, 1996). As Lather (1992) argues:

This focus on the fundamentally relational nature of identity results in the historically constituted and shifting self versus the static and essentialised self inherent in the concept of the free and self-determining individual. (p. 101)

However, it is not only the constitutive nature of the self that interests postmodernism, but that the self is both nonunitary and ongoingly constituted within the diversity of discursive practices (Davies, 1989). Unlike the fixed construction of the subject within social construction theory, postmodern perspectives recognise that the subject is continually constituted and reconstituted (Davies, 1989).

Postmodernists consider that it is not only futile to search for a human essence but that it is also potentially dangerous given that in so doing the individual imposes a consistency on themselves that does not allow for the polymorphousness of human beings (Sass, 1992). The primary problem that postmodernists have with the notion of a central core, as depicted in both the Enlightenment and Romanticism, is that “thinking in terms of a centre invites an authority that leaves us defenceless against impostors of

every description, be it philosophers, politicians or professors of education” (Lovlie, 1992, p. 121).

For Foucault, subjectivity does not exist in reality but rather it has been invented to control and exercise power by creating the illusion that we have a fixed and stable self (Mansfield, 2000). Mansfield goes on to state:

In this way, “subjectivity” is not the free and spontaneous expression of our interior truth. It is the way we are led to think about ourselves, so we will police and present ourselves in the correct way, as not insane, criminal, undisciplined, unkempt, perverse or unpredictable. (p. 10)

Foucault’s goal is to get rid of the subject² (Mumby, 1992). According to Mumby, Foucault states that power and knowledge are linked in the production of the subject and Foucault is interested in exploring the “process by which a certain human discourse emerges in a particular historical period” (p. 82). Foucault argues that by doing this it is possible to look for the constitution of the subject in an historical framework (Mumby, 1992). Therefore Foucault rejects the metaphysics of subjectivity and “reduces the individual to a derivative of certain historical conditions and discourses” (Mumby, p. 83).

5.2.3 Language and the Construction of Subjectivity

It is in the work of Michel Foucault that the poststructuralist principles of the plurality and constant deferral of meaning and the precarious, discursive structure of subjectivity have been integrated into a theory of language and social power which pays detailed attention to the institutional effects of discourse and its role in the constitution and government of individual subjects. (Weedon, 1987, p. 107)

Postmodern positions stress the importance of language in the construction of subjectivity, suggesting that subjectivity is constructed through discourses (Davies, 1991; Flax, 1993a; Giroux, 1991; Henriques et al., 1984; Leonard, 1997; Lovlie, 1992; Lupton, 1998; Marshall, 1994; Milovanovic, 1995; Rosenau, 1992; Sarup, 1993; Seidman, 1994; Weedon, 1987; Zalewski, 2000). Flax argues that there is an insistence in postmodernism that “subjectivity is a discursive effect, not a transcendental, ahistoric, and unchanging objective status, entity, or state” (p. 96). In this sense,

² Although a fuller examination of Foucault’s work is outside the scope of this chapter, it is acknowledged that his body of work is both complex and evolving. However, it is important to note that McNay (1992) highlights the value of Foucault’s later work on the self as he attempts to address the problem of subjectivity and political agency.

language becomes the means for the construction of meaning and subjectivity (Zalewski, 2000). Postmodernists therefore reject “the notion that meaning derives from a connection between words and the world, positing instead that meaning is a product internal to the mechanisms of language” (Hekman, 1991, p. 47).

The notion that all systems operate like language informs much of the postmodern perspective on subjectivity and agency (Ermarth, 2001). In modernism, individuals master language; in postmodernism, it is language that is the master of individuals (Lovlie, 1992). Language is seen as “a structure of signs which is itself the repository of meaning, independent of reference to the ‘facts’ of the world or the intentions of a subject” (Lovlie, p. 119). However, signs are themselves not determining but rather “the process of signification itself gives shape to the reality it implicates” (Henriques et al., 1984, p. 99). Therefore, language is important to postmodernists not only as a way of naming meaning but through the actual construction of meaning given that no meaning is possible outside language (Weedon, 1987; Zalewski, 2000).

For postmodernists, language does not express a pre-existing subjectivity but rather subjectivity is constructed in language (Marshall, 1994). Subjectivity is established through discursive processes and is continually constructed differently depending on the discursive environment (Francis, 2002; Leonard, 1997). Discourses are multiple and contradictory (Davies, 1992) resulting in ‘composite’ selves “simultaneously positioned along multiple social axes (gender, race, class, sexuality, and age)” (Seidman, 1994, p. 18). Seidman continues:

Such composite formulations of identities are less susceptible of exclusionary effects, less silencing of differences, and make us more aware of the socially constructed, normative, and practical character of our knowledges. In a postmodern mode, the conceptual language chosen to speak of the self would be pragmatically guided, that is, with an eye to our aims or the effects of discourse. (p. 18)

5.2.4 Agency and Subjectivity

The postmodern view of language and its role in subjectivity has a relevance for questions of agency. The postmodern deconstruction of the subject, particularly the agency of the subject, has made possible the understanding that subjects are positions in particular discourses; the subject as a simple agent has been displaced (Henriques et al., 1984).

Leonard (1997) argues that a person's sense of self develops through identification with the dominant discursive formation which allocates subject positions appropriate to the person's characteristics (race, gender, class, etc). The result of this process "is that traces of dominant discourses which determined her subject position are 'reinscribed' in her own discourse, and so she experiences this subjectivity not as oppression, but as autonomy" (Leonard, p. 34).

For postmodernists the self no longer has an autonomous centre and instead decisions are made in the "context of a finite variety of possibilities presented in a particular cultural context" (Baker, 1999, p. 86). However, as the postmodern position suggests that subjects exist as multiple and contradictory positionings, it fails to address how these diverse elements are held together (Henriques et al., 1984). As Henriques et al. argue:

Are we to assume as some applications of post-structuralism have implied that the individual subject is simply the sum total of all positions in discourses since birth? If this is the case, what accounts for the continuity of the subject, and the subjective experience of identity? What accounts for the predictability of people's actions, as they repeatedly position themselves within particular discourses? Can people's wishes and desires be encompassed in an account of discursive relations? (p. 204)

Within postmodernism it is argued that agency is an effect of discourse and that "what we experience as autonomy, an experience apparently authenticated by our self-reflection, is an illusion, a self-evident perception that is no more than reflection of dominant discourse" (Leonard, 1997, pp. 43-44). This has significant implications for the issue of agency and political action. Leonard makes this point:

If our perceptions of ourselves, as well as of our environment, are the result of the action of cultural forces upon us since birth, then we cannot attain a sufficiently critical distance to understand ourselves as subjects of dominant discourse. (p. 44)

5.2.5 Is the Subject Really Dead: Sceptical or Affirmative Postmodernism

As previously mentioned³, some authors (Benhabib, 1992; Chester & Segura, 1997; Ebert, 1991; Graham, Doherty and Malek, 1992; Rosenau, 1992; Yeatman, 1991) suggest a separation between (sceptical) postmodernists who offer a pessimistic view of the future of the postmodern age as "one of fragmentation, disintegration, malaise, meaninglessness, a vagueness or even absence of moral parameters and societal chaos"

³ Refer to chapter three section 3.2.

(Rosenau, p. 15); and (affirmative) postmodernists who stress the importance of process and political action and have a more positive view of the postmodern period (Rosenau, 1992)⁴. Much of the previous discussion reflects the position of sceptical postmodernists which is depicted as “the dark side of post-modernism, the post-modernism of despair, the post-modernism that speaks of the immediacy of death, the demise of the subject, the end of the author, the impossibility of truth, and the abrogation of the Order of Representation” (Rosenau, p. 15).

Sceptical postmodernists argue that the only possibility is to invent a postmodern individual who has no traces of the modern subject (Rosenau, 1992). According to Rosenau, this individual will have:

an almost anonymous existence. S/he will be a person but will not be held accountable for events, actions, outcomes; nor will s/he be the author of ‘caring’ relationships (humanist) or creative individualism. S/he will be so independent of all identifiable truth-seeking perspectives that s/he is, in short, no subject at all! (p. 53)

Affirmative postmodernists, on the other hand, do not entirely abandon the subject offering a more positive and optimistic view of postmodernism where the goal is to develop social movements or coalitions of individuals who share experiences (Chester & Segura, 1997). Affirmative postmodernists suggest a reconstructed version of subjectivity where the emphasis is not on the rational individual or on the agency of the subject but rather as “an individual who possesses a reliable form of knowledge based on life experience” (Chester & Segura, p. 111). However, affirmative postmodernists continue to reject “modernist, empiricist, and positivistic epistemologies, and focus entirely on subjective meanings and interpretations” (Chester & Segura, p. 111). Therefore, objective truth is replaced by subjective experience (Chester & Segura, 1997).

Affirmative postmodernists argue that the revitalisation of the subject is not inconsistent with postmodern theory (Rosenau, 1992). In this view, it is possible to conceive of a subject without the corresponding modernist trappings, such as the subject-object duality, by drawing attention to marginal, specific and new social movements as a way of reformulating the subject (Rosenau, 1992).

⁴ It should be noted that these two perspectives are presented as broad and general categorisations. The overlap between and within positions is acknowledged.

In fact some postmodernists argue that although the subject as known in modernism is dispensed with, other possibilities remain for subjectivity and agency. For Lather (1992) decentering the subject “is not so much the elimination of the subject as it is the multi-centeredness of action, a reconceptualisation of agency from *subject-centered agency to the plurality and agency of meaning*” (p. 103). She argues:

What has “died” is the unified, monolithic, reified, essentialised subject capable of fully conscious, fully rational action, a subject assumed in most liberal and emancipatory discourse. Such a subject is replaced by a provisional, contingent, strategic, constructed subject which, while intelligible, is not essentialised. (p. 103)

Schrag (1997) attempts to “resituate and refigure the portrait of the human self after its traditional metaphysical supports and epistemological guarantees have been called into question” (p. 9). Schrag agrees with the postmodern critique of the foundational self but argues that this does not necessitate the dismissal of all senses of self. He states:

In the aftermath of the deconstruction of traditional metaphysics and epistemology, a new self emerges, like the phoenix arising from the ashes – a praxis-oriented self, defined by its communicative practices, oriented toward an understanding of itself in discourse, its action, its being with others, and its experience of transcendence. (p. 9)

Lovlie (1992) argues that the death of the subject certainly means the death of the modern subject, however, he states that no postmodern theorist has dissolved the ‘critical subject’. He argues that postmodernism’s intention is to “demolish ideological positions built on the idea of an epistemic subject being the centre of the world instead of being part of the text of the world. They are doing away with the ‘philosophy of consciousness’ without throwing out its baby, which is individuality” (Lovlie, p. 132). However, the process of deconstruction results in the recapturing of the modern individual in his or her position as reasonable and critical subject (Lovlie, 1992).

Because affirmative postmodernists accept the possibility of specific and contextual truths which occur within a particular form of lived experience, they retain the notion of theorising and the capacity for agency and political action. It is from this position that “a postmodern political movement has risen” (Chester & Segura, 1997, p. 112) and that many postmodern feminists approach the issue of subjectivity.

5.3 Postmodern Feminist Views of Subjectivity

5.3.1 Introduction

Many of us want to move beyond models of the subject organised with reference to a natural core, authentic humanity, or enduring metaphysical essence and to trade the older focus on the unified subject of feminism for a multiplicity of feminist subjects. At the same time, we want a theory of feminist subjectivity that can acknowledge feminism's antagonistic force and cultivate its subversive potential, one that does not simply attach to a theory of social determinacy a vague evocation of voluntarist refusal. ... In other words, we want to endorse the critiques of humanism, functionalism, determinism, and essentialism without denying the possibility of agency. (Weeks, 1998, p. 1)

The postmodern focus on language and discourse as the primary site for the construction of subjectivity, and the erasure of human agency through decentering the subject, have invoked attention from feminism. Many feminists have attempted to explore the insights of postmodernism regarding subjectivity and their relevance for feminism (Alcoff, 1988; Butler, 1990, 1992, 1999; Davies, 1991; de Lauretis, 1984, 1986; Elam, 1994; Flax, 1990a, 1990b, 1993a, 1993b; Hekman, 1990, 1991, 1999; Kristeva, 1984; McLaughlin, 1997).

The critical questions for postmodern feminism are "how the issue of subjectivity can be linked to a notion of human agency in which self-reflexive, politically capable (rather than merely discursive) selves become possible" (Langman & Scatamburlo, 1996, p. 129) and "what are the possibilities within feminist postmodernist thought for a subject capable of resistance?" (McLaren, 1997, p. 110). McNay (1992) is interested in the implications of this position for emancipatory political projects if the value judgements, or metaphysical assumptions, on which these projects have been based are now rejected.

Postmodern feminists attempt to explore the relevance of these issues for a postmodern feminist politics, particularly the possibilities for agency in a postmodern feminist view of subjectivity (Alcoff, 1988; de Lauretis, 1984; Elam, 1994; Flax, 1990a, 1990b, 1993a, 1993b; Hekman, 1990, 1991, 1999; Kristeva, 1984; McLaughlin, 1997; Wearing, 1996; Zalewski, 2000). Like postmodernism more generally, in postmodern feminism the basic notion of the self is questioned and it is argued that there is no essential self and that the concept of identity is always an oppressive one (Zalewski, 2000). In fact, as Zalewski points out, postmodern feminists:

... cast doubt on the political effectiveness of insisting that there is an essential subject of woman within whom identity politics and rights claims can be located. They do not doubt that real women exist or that the category of woman is an important one. But postmodern feminists argue that there is a big difference between an essential or natural subject and a category (p. 40).

In keeping with the feminist commitment to effective political action and resistance, postmodern feminists explore the possibilities of a subject who is both decentered and politically active (Alcoff, 1988; Butler, 1990, 1992, 1999; Davies, 1991; de Lauretis, 1984; Elam, 1994; Flax, 1990a, 1990b, 1993a, 1993b; Hekman, 1990, 1991, 1999; Kristeva, 1984; McLaughlin, 1997; Wearing, 1996; Zalewski, 2000). Postmodern feminists are diverse in their approach to the tension between political agency and the deconstruction of the subject. This section is particularly concerned with an exploration of this issue through exploring the postmodern challenge to modernist feminist views of subjectivity; the construction of subjectivity through language and other mediums; and the issue of agency and subjectivity.

5.3.2 Postmodern Subjectivity and Feminisms

The postmodern deconstruction of the coherent self has posed a significant challenge to modernist feminism (Francis, 2002). In fact, despite significant interest in postmodern subjectivity, Brown (1991) suggests that “postmodern deconstruction of the subject incites palpable feminist panic” (p. 71). McNay (1992) suggests that the critical source of the tension is that postmodernism’s relativity is at odds with the normative demands of much of modernist feminism.

Many feminists are concerned about the idea of a decentered subject, suggesting that it is a threat to the basis of feminism, both in terms of the loss of agency and capacity for political action and the premature nature of the postmodern claim to abandon the subject when feminists are still fighting for subject recognition (Butler, 1990; Hekman, 1991). Many feminist theorists argue that postmodern subjectivity cannot “exercise the agency required for liberatory political activity” (Flax, 1993a, p. 92) and therefore the “rejection of the subject worries feminists, who argue that we must retain a notion of the subject in order to have political and moral agency” (McLaren, 1997, p. 110). As McLaughlin (1997) summarises:

The feminist argument against decentering the subject has focused ... on the link between political agency and the subject. If the subject is dead and all that is left are social forces and networks of language games and significations, frankly why bother? If my individuality is a fiction, a trick produced by circuits of

capillaries of knowledge and power which are everywhere I might as well sit back and have a cup of tea. Here of course is the most voiced concern – nihilism. (p. 11)

In general, modernist feminisms are committed to the notion of identity politics suggesting that “political action is impossible without subjects acting collectively”, (Elam, 1994, p. 72) hence the conclusion of much of modernist feminism: “no subject means no identity, which means no identity politics, which means no feminism” (Elam, p. 72). For these feminists, the issues of subjectivity and agency are clear reasons for dispensing with postmodernism as a viable companion for feminism (Braidotti, 1987; Hartsock, 1990; Soper, 1991; Walby, 1992).

However, many postmodern feminists argue that decentering the subject does not mean an end to agency. Brown (1991) argues that postmodern feminists do not suggest that “women’s pervasive economic subordination, lack of reproductive freedoms, or vulnerability to endemic sexual violence simply evaporate because we cannot fix or circumscribe who or what woman is” (p. 17).

For Brown (1991), feminists’ reservations about the postmodern position on the subject do not seem to be out of a defence of liberalism or a desire to retain the masculine liberal subject. Therefore it is important to ask why “putting the subject in question – decentering its constitution, deconstructing its unity, denaturing its origins and components – [is] such a lightning rod for feminist hostility to postmodernism” (Brown, p. 71). Brown challenges modernist feminists’ resistance to postmodern ideas by arguing that it is not in defence of a political subject but instead suggests that it relates more to maintaining essentialist truth claims about women’s experiences which are seen as “sources and certifications of postfoundational political truth” (p. 72).

Much of modern feminism finds itself in a paradox where patriarchal discourses are critiqued for their essentialist positions which have been defining and oppressive for women, and yet many feminists promote their positions as more true (Felski, 2001). Postmodern perspectives challenge modernist feminism to recognise the broader crisis of representation and questions all claims to truth and knowledge (Felski, 2001; McNay, 1992).

For postmodernists though, there is no absolute truth, therefore “the human ‘knowing subject’ cannot be the ultimate source of it” (Zalewski, 2000, p. 25). The task for postmodern feminists “is not then to find out what woman is, but to expose the power/truth/knowledge game that goes on in defining what woman is” (Zalewski, p. 26).

Francis (2002) argues that postmodernism does not require an end to political action, but does insist on the deconstruction of foundational concepts such as truth and justice, on which many social movements are based. Mouffe (1992) argues that this deconstruction is vital to understanding and acting to end oppression on all levels:

For those feminists who are committed to a radical democratic politics, the deconstruction of essential identities should be seen as the necessary condition for an adequate understanding of the variety of social relations where the principles of liberty and equality should apply. It is only when we discard the view of the subject as an agency both rational and transparent to itself, and discard as well the supposed unity and homogeneity of the ensemble of its positions, that we are in the position to theorise the multiplicity of relations of subordination. (pp. 371-372)

Postmodern feminism is critical of modernist feminism’s reliance on identity politics because of the inherent erasure of differences such that identity politics works “to exclude or simply ignore all of those individuals who fail to conform to the correct model of womanhood” (Elam, 1994, p. 73). As Weedon (1987) argues:

The political significance of decentering the subject and abandoning the belief in essential subjectivity is that it opens up subjectivity to change. In making our subjectivity the product of the society and culture within which we live, feminist poststructuralism insists that forms of subjectivity are produced historically and change with shifts in the wide range of discursive fields which constitute them. (p. 31)

For postmodern feminism the universal subject is an illusion (Zalewski, 2000). The subject is “transitory, contingent, and relational to context and power” (McLaughlin, 1997, p. 11) and the rejection of the unified subject “does not mean ceasing to be able to speak about our experiences as women, only that our words cannot be legitimately deployed or constructed as larger or longer than the moments of the lives they speak from; they cannot be anointed as Authentic or True since the experience they announce is linguistically contained, socially constructed, discursively mediated, and never just individually ‘had’” (Brown, 1991, p. 72).

Therefore postmodern feminism poses a challenge to feminism's essentialism by shifting attention away from universals to the process of construction of subjectivity (Marshall, 1994). The subject is no longer seen in terms of an essence but rather as the "subject in process" – never unitary, never complete" (Marshall, pp. 108-9).

5.3.3 Constructing Subjectivity

In line with postmodern views more generally, postmodern feminism has focused on the importance of language in the construction of subjectivity. However, the postmodern emphasis on language has also been a site of significant critique from feminists. As a result, postmodern feminists have also argued that language alone is inadequate to explain the development of subjectivity and that material practices must also be considered.

5.3.3.1 Discourse and the Construction of Subjectivity

Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the "nature" of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects which they seek to govern. Neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside their discursive articulation, but the ways in which discourse constitutes the minds and bodies of individuals is always a part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases. (Weedon, 1987, p. 108)

Weedon (1987) argues that language is the primary place where subjectivity is constructed. The acquisition of language makes ascribing meaning to our experiences possible. However, the very ways in which we think are determined by the particular discourses available to us (Weedon, 1987). For example, Davies (1989) argues that children learn their gender through exposure to the male-female dualism and its centrality in identity construction:

By basing our interactions with children on the presumption that they are in some unitary and bipolar sense male or female, we teach them the discursive practices through which they can constitute themselves in that way. (p. x)

Both Weedon (1987) and Davies (1989) acknowledge the importance of the competing nature of discourse and the possibilities that this opens up for agency. Discourses compete with each other for the attention of individuals because "the political interests and social implications of any discourse will not be realised without the agency of individuals who are subjectively motivated to reproduce or transform social practices and the social power which underpins them" (Weedon, p. 97).

These discourses not only compete with each other but are also contradictory as individuals embrace different positions at different moments (Weedon, 1987). Individuals are constituted by a multitude of discursive systems in which one may be dominant while others are subordinate therefore creating a constant process of subversion and overdetermination of one by the other (Mouffe, 1992). As Davies (1989) notes:

Individuals, through learning the discursive practices of a society, are able to position themselves within those practices in multiple ways, and to develop subjectivities both in concert with and in opposition to the ways in which others choose to position them. (p. xi)

Following on from this Weedon (1987) argues that it is at the point of resistance to the dominant discourse that alternative forms of knowledge, and therefore agency, become possible. The presence of these contradictions allows each individual to accept or refuse a subject position and to explore possibilities for alternative positions and discourses (Davies, 1992). She continues:

If we see society as being constantly created through discursive practices then it is possible to see the power of those practices, not only to create and sustain the social world but also to see how we can change that world through a refusal of certain discourses and the generation of new ones. (p. xi)

Therefore, given the multiple subject positions available to individuals and the continual constitution of the social world through discursive practices, “we are able to see individuals not as the unitary beings that humanist theory would have them be, but as the complex, changing, contradictory creatures that we each experience ourselves to be, despite our best efforts at producing a unified, coherent and relatively static self” (Davies, 1989, p. xi).

5.3.3.2 Material Practices and the Construction of Subjectivity

Despite the significance of discourse in the construction of subjectivity, much of postmodern feminism has “resisted defining language as the only source of meaning and in doing so has linked power not merely to discourse but also to material practices and struggles” (Giroux, 1991, p. 34).

De Lauretis emphasises the importance of real practices and events and, according to Alcoff (1988), advocates a “shift away from the belief in the totalisation of language or textuality to which most antiessentialist analyses become wedded” (p. 431). Alcoff summarises de Lauretis’ argument that “language is not the sole source and locus of

meaning, that habits and practices are crucial in the construction of meaning, and that through self-analysing practices we can rearticulate female subjectivity” (p. 431).

Flax (1993a) has been one of the primary advocates of the importance of recognising dimensions other than language, and their value in the construction of subjectivity, stating that it does not make sense that nothing else exists except our constructions:

Extradiscursive phenomena and experience can both empower and limit our constructs. Postmodernists produce curiously attenuated accounts of human practices when they ignore affects and somatic processes. In these accounts people never seem to be born, have attachments to others, feel, fantasise, or die. (p. 100)

Flax (1993a) stresses the importance of these other dimensions to life and the value of embracing different perspectives on the diverse forces that construct subjectivity. She challenges postmodernism with the claim that it is not applying the same standards to its own theory as it does for others. The postmodern insistence on the value of difference and the role of multiple and competing claims in the constitution of subjectivity does not appear to apply to the assertion that text and language are the only relevant forces in the construction of subjectivity (Flax, 1993a). Through the privileging of language and text, Flax argues that:

aspects of subjectivity and its practices are denied, obscured, or marginalised. Discourse is a particularly inapt synonym for practices (for example, ballet or breastfeeding) which are predominantly affective, sensuous, visual, tactile, or kinetic. These qualities are important in the constitution and expression of subjectivities” (p. 100).

The primary concern that Flax (1990b) has with these issues is that the denial of the importance of these other material practices and social relations results in an obscuring of the relations of domination.

5.3.4 Agency, Political Action and the Decentered Self in Postmodern Feminism

One recurrent question in these debates is what kind of self is required for effective struggles against domination. Many theorists argue that the decentered/postmodernist self cannot exercise the agency required for liberatory political activity. Does emancipatory action – and the very concept and hope of emancipation – depend upon the sort of unitary self capable of autonomy and undetermined self-reflection that Enlightenment philosophers from Kant to Habermas describe? Or can there be forms of subjectivity that are simultaneously fluid, multicentered and effective in the “outer” worlds of political life and social relations? Can a multicentered and overdetermined self recognise relations of domination and struggle to overcome them? (Flax, 1993b, p. 33)

Many postmodern feminist authors have taken up this issue of the relationship between subjectivity and agency in some detail. There are, of course, significant differences within postmodern feminism about the nature of the subject and its capacity for agency.

The challenge for postmodern feminists has been to explore the possible ways in which the insights from postmodern perspectives might be linked with the interests of feminism (Alcoff, 1988; de Lauretis, 1984; Flax, 1990a, 1990b, 1993a, 1993b; Hekman, 1990, 1991, 1999; Kristeva, 1984; McLaughlin, 1997). In so doing, much of postmodern feminism has “rejected the postmodern emphasis on erasing human agency by decentering the subject” (Giroux, 1991, p. 34) and made a significant contribution to postmodern thought and the implied lack of agency in the postmodern subject (Flax, 1993a; Giroux, 1991). The strong relationship between agency and emancipation in feminist thought has ensured that “theoretical *re*construction and emancipatory discourses remain vital” (Francis, 2002, p. 49).

5.3.4.1 Reclaiming Agency

Most postmodern feminists do not agree that postmodern positions on subjectivity necessitate an absence of agency (Alcoff, 1988; Butler, 1990, 1992, 1999; Davies, 1991; de Lauretis, 1984, 1986; Elam, 1994; Flax, 1990a, 1990b, 1993a, 1993b; Hekman, 1990, 1991, 1999; Kristeva, 1984; McLaughlin, 1997; Zalewski, 2000). However postmodern feminists do challenge the necessity of combining agency with an essentialist view of women where identity politics and rights can be located (Zalewski, 2000). Moi (2001) argues that feminism needs an agentic subject even if it is seen “as no more than an aspect of the decentered human psyche” (p. 385).

Rather than see the postmodern self as an end to agency, Davies (1992) suggests that it actually provides a way of ending women’s subjected condition. She argues that poststructuralism “does not offer the death of the subject but the means of claiming the right to subject status – a subject who realises, recognises, speaks, writes her (collective) subjected condition and searches out the ways in which the patterns that hold that subjection in place can be subverted and turned to other ends (Davies, p. 59).

McLaughlin (1997) argues that subjectivity by way of being transient and contextual does not imply that agency is not important, but rather that it is vital:

Freed from finding their true source or meaning feminism can focus on presenting the harsh realities of performing identity, resisting and accepting normalisation ... day in and day out. Trying to map a way through the exclusions and abuse heaped on so many for failing to ascribe to the hierarchy of what is important and correct, suggests transgressing may not lead to salvation but what it may do is fracture normality and is thus political and full of agency. (p. 11)

For McLaughlin (1997) the possibilities for collective action are increased through the rejection of the autonomous subject because it arises from “political positions of exclusion and abuse, which suggest that surviving involves balancing multiple positions of performance and pain” (p. 11). McLaughlin believes that agency will be increased by the realisation of the myth of the autonomous self.

Benhabib (1992) supports the “move toward the radical situatedness and contextualisation of the subject” (p. 211). She addresses the question of agency in postmodern thought by distinguishing between strong (sceptical) and weak (affirmative) perspectives, suggesting that the views of the subject and its capacity for agency differ according to these general distinctions in postmodernism. She argues that the strong version of postmodernism is not consistent with feminist objectives because the project for emancipation is impossible without a sense of selfhood which includes agency and autonomy:

The subject ... dissolves into the chain of significations of which it was supposed to be the initiator. Along with this dissolution of the subject into yet “another position in language” disappear of course concepts of intentionality, accountability, self-reflexivity and autonomy. The subject that is but another position in language can no longer master and create that distance between itself and the chain of significations in which it is immersed such that it can reflect upon them and creatively alter them. (p. 214)

On the other hand, Benhabib (1992) posits that the weak version of postmodernism is consistent with feminism because it holds a view of the subject, but one which “would *situate* the subject in the context of various social, linguistic and discursive practices” (p. 214). In fact, as with McLaughlin (1997), Benhabib questions whether a conception of the subject as fragmentary might be more conducive to resistance and the struggle for emancipation. She notes:

The traditional attributes of the philosophical subject of the West, like self-reflexivity, the capacity for acting on principles, rational accountability for one’s actions and the ability to project a life-plan into the future, in short, some form of autonomy and rationality, could then be reformulated by taking account of the radical situatedness of the subject. (p. 214)

This view is also shared by other postmodern feminists who argue that postmodern perspectives can open up new possibilities for agency and change (Elam, 1994; Wearing, 1996). For example, Wearing sees within postmodern views the potential for a subject capable of political action but without essentialist and hierarchical notions of causation. Elam argues for a political practice based not on identity but solidarity, which she sees as “a coalition built around a suspicion of identity as the essential grounding for meaningful political action” (p. 69).

5.3.4.2 The Constituting and the Constituted Subject

The project to reconstitute the subject in postmodern feminism has attempted to address the dilemma between the constituting subject of modernism and the constituted subject of (sceptical) postmodernism (Hekman, 1991).

According to Hekman (1991), feminist theorists such as de Lauretis and Alcoff have attempted to develop a dialectical relationship between the constituting and the constituted subject in “an effort to graft aspects of the constituting subject, typically agency and a quasi-constituting function, onto a socially constituted concept of the subject” (p. 48) whereas other theorists such as Butler and Kristeva aim to displace this dichotomy and decenter the subject.

However, all perspectives within postmodern feminism share the belief that “the Cartesian subject is a bankrupt conception, and ... that feminists must attempt to formulate a conception of the subject that is both constituted and capable of resistance, linguistically structured yet revolutionary” (Hekman, 1991, p. 58).

5.3.4.2.1 Constituting and Constituted Subjects – A Dialectical Approach

Both de Lauretis and Alcoff attempt to merge aspects of the constituting and the constituted subject in a dialectical way in that they seek to join the active elements of the humanist subject with the constituted subject, to join the inner and outer worlds (Hekman, 1991).

De Lauretis (1984) has attempted to join aspects of the Cartesian self, most notably the capacity for agency, with aspects of the postmodern self, particularly the external determination of the subject (Hekman, 1991). In a sense de Lauretis is attempting to combine the most desirable elements of each alternative to create a dialectical

conception of the self. Hekman notes de Lauretis' argument that "although individuals are constructed by what she calls 'codes' and social formations, they are able to rework these influences in their own particular ways and thus avoid complete determination by them" (p. 49).

This results in a subject who has both an 'inner' world, of agency and action; and an 'outer' world, of determination by social forces; and subjectivity is formed through the interaction and intersection of these worlds (Hekman, 1991; de Lauretis, 1984). De Lauretis argues that feminist theory is caught in a contradiction where it is both excluded from discourse and imprisoned within it (Alcoff, 1988; de Lauretis, 1984). The same is true for the female subject and it is here that de Lauretis attempts to construct "a theory of the subject that both concedes these truths and yet allows for the possibility of feminism" (Alcoff, p. 422).

De Lauretis (1984) believes that it is possible to develop a position on subjectivity that does not resort to nominalism by linking subjectivity to the concept of experience (Alcoff, 1988). According to Alcoff, de Lauretis' argument is that subjectivity "is constructed through a continuous process, an ongoing constant renewal based on an interaction with the world, which she defines as experience" (p. 423). De Lauretis argues for a new conception of subjectivity where subjectivity is determined by experience (Alcoff, 1988). De Lauretis uses the term 'experience' to signify "a *process* by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed" (p. 159). Relations that are primarily social and historical (material, economic and interpersonal) are understood as subjective (de Lauretis, 1984). As de Lauretis argues:

For each person, therefore, subjectivity is an ongoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world. On the contrary, it is the effect of that interaction – which I call experience; and this it is produced not by external ideas, values, or material causes, but by one's personal, subjective, engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, and affect) to the events of the world. (p. 159)

De Lauretis (1984) argues that it is through this process that subjectivity becomes engendered. She rejects the notion that the only options are either a genderless subject, the search for the 'root' of human nature; or a subject entirely shaped by gender, an essentialism characteristic of much feminist theory (Alcoff, 1988).

Instead, de Lauretis (1986) considers identity as “the concept of a multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with, language; an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class, and often indeed across languages and cultures; an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations” (p. 9). Therefore new possibilities for agency arise within the particular discursive configurations in which each individual exists (de Lauretis, 1986).

This is a similar position to that advocated by Alcoff (1988) who has taken the work of de Lauretis and continued this notion of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds in the construction of subjectivity (Hekman, 1991). Both theorists explore the interaction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds in that women’s identity “is relative to her context, yet she is also the creator of that identity (Alcoff, p. 434). Alcoff (1988, 1997) has taken de Lauretis’ notion of experience and argues that the way in which experience is conceptualised is critical in determining strategies.

Alcoff (1988) is concerned with the ‘problem of women’ where the category of woman is constantly seeking determination. She argues that there are two responses to this problem - firstly, to claim that women are the ones who should do the determining in regard to the nature of women (cultural feminists); and secondly, the rejection that any form of definition is possible and the belief that “both feminist and misogynist attempts to define woman are politically reactionary and ontologically mistaken (poststructural feminists)” (p. 407). Alcoff argues that both of these responses are inadequate and that what is required is to develop a new course which avoids both essentialism and nominalism. Instead she argues for a concept of gendered positionality.

Within this concept of positionality, Alcoff (1988) stresses two points - that the concept of woman is a term that is only possible within a certain context; and that this position can be useful to women “as a location for the construction of meaning, a place from where meaning can be *discovered* (the meaning of femaleness)” (Alcoff, p. 434). She continues:

In this analysis, then, the concept of positionality allows for a determinate though fluid identity of woman that does not fall into essentialism: woman is a position from which a feminist politics can emerge rather than a set of attributes that are ‘objectively identifiable’. Seen in this way, being a “woman” is to take up a position within a moving historical context and to be able to choose what we make of this position and how we alter this context. (p. 435)

The difficulty with this dialectical approach of both de Lauretis and Alcoff is that it leaves the dichotomy of constituting and constituted in place (Hekman, 1991). Hekman argues that these theorists, in their attempts to ensure the survival of agency, have missed the crucial point in relation to the constituted subject in that this perspective does not “simply replace the constituting subject with the constituted subject but displaces the dichotomy altogether” (p. 51). She explains:

This conception of the subject is articulated not by retaining a Cartesian concept of agency but by emphasising that subjects who are subjected to multiple discursive influences create modes of resistance to those discourses out of the very discourses that shape them. (p. 51)

The key postmodern feminist authors who attempt to reconfigure the subject in this manner are Kristeva and Butler. A brief explanation of their work follows.

5.3.4.2.2 Constituting and Constituted Subjects – Rejecting the Dichotomy

Kristeva⁵ attempts to redefine the nature of the subject through deconstructing and decentering the subject. Rather than seeking to rework the relationship between the constituting and the constituted subject, Kristeva is more concerned with rejecting the dualistic thinking characteristic of many other postmodern feminists, such as de Lauretis and Alcoff (Hekman, 1991). Kristeva has been most influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis and has used this as the basis of her work (Sarup, 1993).

Unlike Freud, Kristeva does not regard the subject as ever reaching a state of stability (Kristeva, 1984; Mansfield, 2000; Weedon, 1987). As Mansfield notes, for Kristeva the “subject is thus not a fixed system, prone to the occasional outburst of incomprehensible and irrational displacement, the odd outlaw thought or image crossing the boundary fence from the conscious to the unconscious. Its incomplete and unresolved nature permanently accompanies it” (p. 81). Kristeva refers to the ‘subject in process’ which “signifies the inherent instability of the unitary subject of rational discourse and the symbolic order” (Weedon, p. 88).

For Kristeva an effective feminism can only be negative through deconstruction (Alcoff, 1988). Kristeva argues that “a woman cannot be; it is something which does not even belong in the order of being. *It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative*, at

⁵ It is acknowledged that Kristeva does not accept the labels of either feminism or postmodernism, however given the compatibility of her ideas with these perspectives, her work has been included in this section (Hekman, 1991).

odds with what already exists so that we may say ‘that’s not it’ and ‘that’s still not it’” (Kristeva, 1981 cited in Alcoff, p. 418).

According to Weedon (1987) Kristeva uses the term ‘woman’ in a deconstructive way, arguing that “there is no essential womanhood, not even a repressed one and that feminist practice cannot be directed at achieving or recovering some sort of essential state” (p. 69). Therefore the category of woman can only be understood in terms of what it rejects (Weedon, 1987).

However, Kristeva argues that this does not mean that there are no possibilities for political struggle. Hekman (1991) states that Kristeva is attempting to redefine the concept of agency as “a product of discourse, something that language provides us in discursive formations, not an innate quality located in ‘inner space’” (p. 54). As Weedon (1987) notes:

Politically the notion of being a woman is at best a useful, temporary political strategy for organising campaigns on behalf of women’s interests as they are currently defined within patriarchy. (p. 69)

The subject for Kristeva has ‘revolutionary’ potential (Kristeva, 1984). Hekman (1991) argues that this revolutionary potential is relevant for Kristeva “in that it undermines the basis of the subjectivity of its predecessor” and that while being constituted by discourse it is not to be considered passive (p. 55). Kristeva’s argument is that “each new subject that is constituted transforms and revolutionises the subject that precedes it; it contains the potential of deconstructing the subject that it challenges” (Hekman, p. 54).

Kristeva rejects the dualism of constituting and constituted subject thereby rejecting the epistemological foundation of the modern subject through rejecting its inherent dichotomies (Hekman, 1991). She recommends that “feminists use the category of women as a political tool without attributing ontological integrity to the term” and therefore while she does not believe that the category of woman exists, it has uses when employed for political purposes (Butler, 1990, p. 325).

For Butler (1990, 1992, 1999), gender (and therefore the self) is performative and as such does not have an essence. Rather, gender is constituted by a series of performances without which there would be no such thing as gender (Francis, 2002; Mansfield, 2000;

Marshall, 1994; Thornham, 2001). Mansfield describes Butler's position in the following way:

Gender is a correctly coordinated set of acts and gestures that link the subject to clearly defined parameters of healthy and normal identification. To be masculine or feminine does not involve giving expression to a naturally developing interior truth. It means performing and representing yourself in sanctioned and expected ways to give the impression that your life is organised around the acceptable poles of gendered being. Yet what counts is the performance alone. The inner essence does not exist except as the fantasy of a gender system that needs to present its policed and disciplined behaviours as natural. (p. 76)

In fact, Butler argues that the concepts of male and female are illusions and that reifying gender into these categories only hides the power relations which form the subject (Francis, 2002; Marshall, 1994). For Butler "gender, like other categories, of knowledge ... is the product not of truth but of power expressed in discourse" (Thornham, 2001, p. 46). Francis notes that Butler is critical of the women's movement for "perpetuation of the dualism which has led to women's oppression, construction and maintenance of 'womanhood' as a coherent category" (p. 41).

The implication of subjectivity being a series of performances is that there is 'no doer behind the deed' and this is the main source of criticism from feminists such as Benhabib (1992) who consider Butler's position too relativist to further feminist concerns. Benhabib argues that "what follows from this Nietzschean position is a vision of the self as a masquerading performer, except of course we are now asked to believe that there is no self behind the mask" (p. 215).

Given this, Butler's position has significant implications for agency and Benhabib (1992) asks if there is "any possibility of transforming these 'expressions' which constitute us?" (p. 215). She continues:

If we are no more than the sum total of the gendered expressions we perform, is there ever any chance to stop the performance for a while, to pull the curtain down, and only let it rise if one can have a say in the production of the play itself? (p. 215)

Butler, however, argues that there are significant transformative possibilities within this view of the subject where coalition politics and new subject positions become possible (Thornham, 2001). Butler draws a distinction between being constituted by discourse and being determined by it (Benhabib, 1992). She is concerned with the ways in which these gender norms are resisted and subverted (Mansfield, 2000).

Butler (1990) argues that “feminist theory has taken the category of women to be foundational to any further political claims without realising that the category effects a political closure on the kinds of experiences articulable as part of a feminist discourse” (p. 325). For Butler the absence of reified gender relations opens up possibilities for using more complex subject positions and the development of coalition strategies that welcome the multiplicity of subjects. She explains:

Clearly, the category of women is internally fragmented by class, color, age, and ethnic lines, to name but a few; in this sense, honouring the diversity of the category and insisting upon its definitional nonclosure appears to be a necessary safeguard against substituting a reification of women’s experience for the diversity that exists. But how do we know what exists prior to its discursive articulation? ... Indeed, the political critique of the subject questions whether making a conception of identity into the ground of politics, however internally complicated, prematurely forecloses the possible cultural articulations of the subject-position that a new politics might well generate. (p. 327)

5.4 Relevance to this Research

Postmodern perspectives on subjectivity have provided a serious challenge to the modern conception of the subject. Postmodernism has had a significant impact on the issues of concern to this thesis, particularly in relation to the decentered subject and possibilities for agency. Research into the area of subjectivity cannot fail to consider the postmodern position and its implications for future work in this area. While feminism has had mixed reactions to postmodernism and the postmodern position on subjectivity, in particular, postmodern feminist perspectives have developed significant insights into the construction of subjectivity and the role of agency in the decentered subject. These concerns are central to this thesis, informing both the findings and concluding arguments of this research.

5.5 Conclusion

Following on from the previous chapter on subjectivity and modernism, this chapter has provided an overview of postmodern perspectives on subjectivity. The two central themes have been the construction of subjectivity and the role of agency in postmodern subjectivity.

Within postmodern perspectives, subjectivity is constructed through language. The discursive context of society determines the subject positions available to individuals within a competitive and contradictory environment. Postmodern feminism has explored the possibilities for agency within these contradictory discourses and also encouraged the valuing of other non-textual sites for the construction of subjectivity.

One of the critical issues to arise from the postmodern position on subjectivity is the question of agency. In the decentered self, possibilities for agency may appear limited. However postmodern feminists have attempted to reclaim the concept of agency and redefine it within the decentered self. Many postmodern feminists argue that greater possibilities for agency and political action arise from such a redefinition.

The contribution of the postmodern challenge to subjectivity cannot be denied. This influence is clear in the development of this thesis and is discussed in greater detail in later chapters. The following two chapters outline the research method and analysis.

CHAPTER SIX

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

6.1 Introduction

The methodological framework for this research, feminist personal narrative, is outlined in this chapter. Drawing on feminist standpoint perspectives and postmodern feminisms, feminist personal narrative challenges the positivist notion of objective truth and researcher detachment characteristic of empirical research. This approach reconceptualises empirical validity and argues for the inclusion of subjectivity, particularly the importance of locating and situating the research and the researcher.

There are four sections in this chapter. Firstly, feminist personal narrative is explored with particular attention to the importance of the relationship between individuals and society, the role of the researcher and possibilities for change; secondly, narrative analysis is outlined and the primary forms of analysis for this thesis (narrative as political praxis; researcher narrative analysis) are explored; thirdly, issues of interpretation and validity in narrative analysis are considered; and finally, the relevance of feminist personal narrative to this research is discussed.

6.2 Feminist Personal Narrative¹

“A narrative” is a story told by structural and rhetorical means in which there is an unfolding, a development of progression, a denouement and/or conclusion. In other words, in which there is a beginning, a middle and an end. (Stanley, 1993a, p. 213)

As a research method narrative has been used in feminism through employing a variety of techniques such as oral history, autobiography, multiple biographies, and semi-structured interviews, as a way of giving voice to women previously silenced in society (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993). Burgos (1989) states that the “autobiographical approach is a technique which gives us privileged information about a dimension of human reality

¹ Many authors use a variety of terms to describe the particular methodological approach employed in this research. These terms range from narrative, oral history, life story, life narrative, life histories, oral narratives, auto/biographical, interactive interviewing, and so on. For the general purposes of this research, I have treated feminist oral history and feminist auto/biography as forms of feminist personal narrative, and while at times I will refer to these specific terms, I am using the broad term feminist personal narrative to describe the particular approach taken to the methodology in this research.

which could not be approached by other means” (p. 29). Ribbens (1993) notes that the appeal of auto/biography for feminism is that it provides a way of exploring women’s experiences and understandings outside traditional academic methods. As Cotterill and Letherby explain:

The narrative technique allows respondents to “tell the story” in whichever way they choose and, importantly, validates individual experience and provides a vehicle through which this experience can be expressed to a wider audience. Life histories, in our view, “tell it like it is” from the lived experience of the narrator. They are invaluable because they do not fracture life experiences, but provide a means of evaluating the present, re-evaluating the past, and anticipating the future. (pp. 73-74)

There has been a significant rise in interest in all forms of narrative work and this has been apparent in the social sciences generally, and specifically within feminism. This increase appears to be related to the postmodern turn in the social sciences generally. As Evans (1993) points out:

The reasons for this new interest are many: in the social sciences the present discussion of the limits of the “grand narrative” of theory has made it inevitable that an interest in a smaller scale should emerge. Equally, the disenchantment with meta-theory which is a feature of postmodernism has given the particular, rather than the general, a new place in theoretical speculation. (p. 5)

As a research method, forms of feminist personal narrative are appealing in the challenge that they create to traditional methods and forms of knowledge generation. Okely (1992) suggests that autobiography, as a form of narrative, “dismantles the positivist machine” (p. 3). As researchers inevitably affect the nature of the research process, Cotterill and Letherby (1993) argue that it is “better to acknowledge this and explore it analytically rather than subscribe to false notions of ‘objectivity’ or to collapse and confuse our respondents’ experiences with our own” (p. 74).

Richardson (1990) has explored the nature of narrative for feminism and the different ways in which narrative is relevant for research:

Narratives exist at the everyday, autobiographical, biographical, cultural, and collective levels. The (*sic*) reflect the universal human experience of time and link the past, present, and future.... Narrative gives room for the expression of our individual and shared fates, our personal and communal worlds.... Narrative is the best way to understand the human experience because it is the way humans understand their own lives. It is the closest to the human experience and hence the least falsifying of that experience. Narrative rejuvenates the “sociological imagination” in the service of liberatory civic discourses and transformative social projects. (p. 133)

Richardson (1990) outlines five distinct and interconnected ways in which narrative is sociologically significant. Firstly, she explores the ways in which narrative relates to everyday life and “how actors go about their rounds and accomplish their tasks” (p. 125). Secondly, autobiographical narrative relates to “how people articulate how the past is related to the present” (p. 125) and in this way “telling one’s story gives meaning to the past from the point of view of the present and future” (p. 126):

[Narrative] is the way individuals understand their own lives and best understand the lives of others. Experiences are connected to other experiences, and are evaluated in relation to the larger whole. Something does not make sense when it does not “fit in” with the narrative. To make sense of the events in their lives, a person reconstructs biography. The experiences of (re)narrativising - like the experience of biographical time itself - is open-ended and polysemous, allowing different meanings and systems of meanings to emerge. (p. 126)

Thirdly, people’s lives may be understood biographically. The relationships and interactions that occur within society require people to make sense of other people’s behaviours, intentions and perspectives. Richardson (1990) suggests that this capacity to relate to others from their perspective and to empathise with others is an integral part of the nature of our society, and is a capacity that is grounded in narrative.

Fourthly, narratives can be significant as cultural stories in that they may serve a culturally significant purpose in terms of the maintenance of the status quo. As Richardson (1990) explains:

Participation in a culture includes participation in the narratives of that culture, a general understanding of the stock of meanings and their relationships to each other. The process of telling the story creates and supports a social world. (p. 127)

Finally, Richardson (1990) suggests that narrative “gives voice to those who are silenced or marginalised in the cultural narrative” (p. 128) through the collective story which “displays an individual’s story by narrativising the experiences of the social category to which the individual belongs, rather than by telling the particular individual’s story or by simply retelling the cultural story” (p. 128). Richardson highlights the change possibilities inherent in the collective story approach to narrative. Given that people make sense of their lives through reference to available social stories, she suggests that people may often be unable to ‘fit’ their own personal stories into these broader social stories, thus feeling limited in their lives. In contrast to this though, the collective story provides a vital role through transforming possibilities for the creation of new and liberating stories that encourage a wider membership amongst those

feeling alienated by the dominant cultural stories (Richardson, 1990). Richardson expands this point by arguing:

Collective stories which deviate from standard cultural plots provide new narratives; hearing them legitimates a replotting of one's own life. New narratives offer the patterns for new lives. The story of the transformed life, then, becomes a part of the cultural heritage affecting future stories and future lives. (p. 129)

Richardson (1990) stresses the change possibilities in the collective story and suggests that if narrative were to be valued in the same way that the logico-scientific paradigm has been valued it would “empower individuals, contribute to liberating civic discourses, and support transformative social projects” (p. 130). Similarly, in relation to social, and particularly feminist research, Richardson argues:

If we wish to understand the deepest and most universal of human experiences, if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experiences of people, if we wish for a union between poetics and science, or if we wish to use our privileges and skills to empower the people we study, then we *should* value the narrative. (p. 133-134)

An exploration of feminist personal narrative reveals three elements that specifically relate to the aims of this research - the relationship between individuals and society; the role of the researcher and the importance of the process elements of the research; and change possibilities. Each of these elements is now explored below.

6.2.1 The Relationship Between Individuals and Society

Many authors stress the importance of narrative because of what these personal stories potentially reveal about the nature of our society (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Atkinson, 1997; Burgos, 1989; Evans, 1993; Harrison & Lyon, 1993; Middleton, 1993; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Ribbens, 1993; Richardson, 1990; Riessman, 1993; Stanley, 1992, 1993b). It has been suggested that personal narrative tells the researcher “something about general features of ‘life out there’ as exemplified in this and other particular cases” (Stanley, 1993b, p. 41) and allows the researcher access to the ways in which society and culture “speaks itself” through an individual’s story” (Riessman, p. 5). Narrative also provides opportunities for the researcher to “examine gender inequalities, racial oppression, and other practices of power that may be taken for granted by individual speakers” (Riessman, p. 5). As the Personal Narrative Group argues:

The very act of giving form to a whole life - or a considerable portion of it - requires, at least implicitly, considering the meaning of the individual and social

dynamics which seem to have been most significant in shaping the life. The act of constructing a life narrative forces the author to move from accounts of discrete experiences to an account of why and how the life took the shape it did. This why and how - the interpretive acts that shape a life, and a life narrative - need to take as high a place on the feminist agenda as the recording of women's experiences. (p. 4)

As with many forms of feminism, personal narrative rejects the dualist ways in which the relationship between individuals and society has previously been thought of, and instead advocates that both individual experiences and social forces need to be explored simultaneously. In the past, explanations valuing either social structure or individual agency have been emphasised. In personal narrative, it is the dynamic between individuals and society that becomes the point of investigation (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). As the Personal Narrative Group states:

We maintain that personal narratives are particularly rich sources because, attentively interpreted, they illuminate both the logic of individual courses of action and the effects of system-level constraints within which those courses evolve. (p. 6)

In stressing the valuable insights that autobiographical approaches can give to the connection between individual experiences and society, Burgos (1989) states that life stories are "a specific form of narrative based on the individual subject; they never lose sight of the two poles of human reality, the individual and the social. It is not the formation of the private self which is the main goal of the story, but the connection between these two poles" (p. 31). The feminist notion of 'the personal is political' has considerable relevance in this research methodology (Ribbens, 1993).

Ribbens (1993) takes the rejection of the polarity between individuals and society further and suggests that "'society' can be seen to be, not 'out there', but precisely located 'inside our heads', that is, in our socially located and structured understandings of 'my-self', 'my-life', 'me-as-a-person', and so forth" (p. 88). Ribbens is building here on the claim by Jackson (1990, cited in Ribbens 1993) that the self is intrinsically social and thus reinforces the claim that this dualism between individuals and society should be rejected.

Atkinson (1997) suggests that auto/biographical research can have a significant impact on both a personal level, through helping people to make sense of their own lives and engage in a process of life review; and also at a social level, by bringing out

commonalities as well as differences in people's individual experiences. This encourages a broader social awareness and sharing of experiences and also provides a way in which other people can learn about another's life experiences.

It has also been argued that personal narratives are particularly useful in work with 'non-dominant' groups:

Personal narratives of nondominant social groups (women in general, racially or ethnically oppressed people, lower-class people, lesbians) are often particularly effective sources of counterhegemonic insight because they expose the viewpoint embedded in dominant ideology as particularist rather than universal, and because they reveal the reality of a life that defies or contradicts the rules. (Personal Narrative Group, 1989, p. 7)

This relates to Collins' (1986, 1991) work in the area of standpoint perspective where it is suggested that the insights of the oppressed can generate valuable information about the nature of society. This also relates to Richardson's (1990) notion of the collective story and its ability to challenge the dominant cultural story given its capacity to give "voice to those who are silenced or marginalised in the cultural narrative" (p. 128). The Personal Narratives Group (1989) suggests:

The personal narrative, whether it reveals an acceptance of or a challenge to the given rules, also documents on the individual level the very process of reproduction or undermining of these rules.... Both narratives of acceptance and narratives of rebellion are responses to the system in which they originate and thus reveal its dynamics. (p. 8)

Therefore the connection between the individual and the social in personal narrative has significant implications for change possibilities in that personal narrative "allows us to see lives as simultaneously individual and social creations, and to see individuals as simultaneously the changers and the changed" (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 6). Richardson (1990) emphasises this change potential and refers to it in terms of the liberation narrative:

This narrative tells the collective story of the disempowered, not by judging, blaming or advising them, but by placing their lives within the context of larger social and historical forces, and by directing energy towards changing those social structures which perpetuate injustice. (p. 204)

6.2.2 The Role of the Researcher and the Research Process

Feminist personal narrative recognises that knowledge generation is a subjective, rather than objective, process in which the researcher plays a fundamental role. In this sense the research is "always about a process just as much as it is about a product or

outcomes” (Atkinson, 1997, p. 13) and the researcher is “an active participant involved in distinctive ways with the shaping of a personal narrative” (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 201). As Stivers (1993) discusses:

There is no such thing as removing the observer from the knowledge acquisition process, since to do so would be like trying to see without eyes; if so, frankly subjective knowledge, such as that found in personal narratives and defended by feminists, becomes a much more respectable way of knowing, even in social science. There is no such thing as ‘unbiased’ knowledge in the sense of knowledge ungrounded in a set of intellectual assumptions and constitutive interests; this awareness validates the kind of particular, contextual knowledge personal narrative imparts, and it undercuts the universalising claims that feminism is in the process of deconstructing. (p. 410)

Personal narrative is a joint creation between both research participant and researcher that reflects the interactive nature of the narrative (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Rosenthal, 1993; Temple, 1994). The nature of the text created is then a reflection of the research relationship and the individuality of both the research participant and the researcher (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Atkinson (1997) argues that the researcher role has “a bearing not only on how stories unfolded, but even helped determine what they were about” (p. 30). Cotterill and Letherby state that “all academic research and subsequent writing involves, whether acknowledged or not, the weaving of the biographies of all participants and their significant others” (p. 67). The strength of feminist personal narrative is the open acknowledgement of this relationship and the commitment to reflect on the impact this has on the knowledge generated. As Cotterill and Letherby note:

This seems more honest and accurate, for then the completed work will not be an account of ‘their’ experiences with an acknowledgement of the researcher’s involvement, but rather an account of “our” experiences. In other words, this would acknowledge the relevance and implications of personal history for this type of research. However, it means that the researcher has to give considerable thought to her own experiences - she has to ‘place’ herself in relation to the issues she is researching. (p. 72)

Implied here is the importance of the researcher identifying their position and locating themselves in the research as a person with a particular set of values and beliefs and agendas. Therefore the research process becomes a shared one with the research participants where the researcher is able to share elements of their own story, thereby reducing the power imbalances that traditionally exist in the relationship between researcher and research participant (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993).

This highly reflexive element to feminist personal narrative is a central part of the research process and is fundamental in establishing the validity and credibility of the knowledge generated. As suggested by the Personal Narratives Group (1989) “being aware of her own purposes allows an interpreter to shape the story without imposing unnecessarily on the text” (p. 202).

Okely (1992) discusses the ways in which this notion of researcher reflexivity has been dismissed in her field with the suggestion that it is a form of narcissism. She counters this claim by stating:

Self-adoration is quite different from self-awareness and a critical scrutiny of the self. Indeed those who protect the self from scrutiny could as well be labelled self-satisfied and arrogant in presuming their presence and relations with others to be unproblematic. (p. 2)

Stanley (1992) uses the term auto/biography to capture the way the researcher’s story runs alongside that of the research participants in autobiographical research. Stanley suggests that the ‘auto/biographical I’ signals the critical importance of the researcher and their story in the research process:

The auto/biographical I is an inquiring analytic sociological - here feminist sociological - agent who is concerned in constructing, rather than “discovering”, social reality and sociological knowledge. The use of “I” explicitly recognises that such knowledge is contextual, situational, and specific, and that it will differ systematically according to the social location (as a gendered, raced, classed, sexualised, person) of the particular knowledge-producer. Thus the “autobiography.”... of the sociologist becomes epistemologically crucial no matter what particular research activity we are engaged in. (pp. 49-50)

6.2.3 Change Possibilities

As previously discussed, Richardson (1990) introduces the notion of the collective story and the ways in which this liberation narrative might be used to give voice to those who are more marginalised in society. The importance of narrative in inviting researchers to “listen on the margins of discourse and to give voice to muted groups in our society” (Langellier, 1989, p. 243), increases the potential of this perspective to achieve change to the position of marginalised groups.

It is also suggested that this approach is both empowering and change-oriented for both researcher and research participant (Chase & Bell, 1994; Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Gluck & Patai, 1991; Middleton, 1993; Scanlon, 1993). Change may be produced simply as a form of intervention in people’s lives that may then stimulate further

changes (Middleton, 1993). However, the particular nature of feminist personal narrative lends itself to a deeper exploration of people's lives than many other research methods and a stronger emphasis on connecting individual life experiences to society more generally. Cotterill and Letherby suggest that this process "may make the participants of the research think about things they have never thought about before or indeed think about things in a different way" (p. 77).

In personal narrative the research process also has a significant change effect on the researcher given the researcher's subjective and reflexive role. Kirkwood (1993) argues this point:

As *feminist* researchers we are not simply looking for a more effective way of exploring and describing women's experiences, we are also committed to bringing about change in the subordination of women. This commitment is fundamental to the way we conduct research, live our lives and channel our resources. As a result, we are engaged in our research in a deeply personal way. This brings about a variety of circumstances in which personal response is integral to the research we conduct and the way in which we act for change. (p. 29)

This commitment to a broader purpose in the research activity ensures a high level of involvement and investment for researchers working from this perspective. However, it is also very much related to the relational and personal nature of interactions with research participants, which at times is characterised by an exchange of feelings, thoughts, ideas and energy (Greed, 1990). Learning from participants is significant for researchers, both as researchers and as people more generally. As Greed explains:

It is a pursuit that involves and affects my personal and emotional self totally, and which I can never limit to purely the academic or professional compartment of my life. Indeed, my research will not just end tidily with a completed thesis, but rather is likely to lead on to my being aware of even more and deeper questions for further development later on in my life. My research interacts with my life, and both it and I myself change and go through different stages of development in parallel as the work progresses. (p. 151)

6.3 Narrative Analysis

The reconceptualisation of the process of analysis in feminist narrative research has been taken up by many authors (Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1991; Aldridge, 1993; Borland, 1991; Burgos, 1989; Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Harding, 1987; Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994; Lieblich, 1994; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Richardson, 1990; Riessman, 1993; Stivers, 1993; Temple, 1994). Unlike traditional methods of

analysis, narrative analysis appears well suited to any research activity which values the subjective and the contextual in the research method, hence its particular relevance for feminism (Riessman, 1993).

There are many different approaches to narrative analysis. Langellier (1989) has provided a summary of the five major approaches reflected in the literature. Firstly, narrative analysis as story text is a form of linguistic analysis that is primarily interested in the text of a particular story. Secondly, narrative analysis as storytelling performance begins the connection between stories and society by examining the ways in which a story is performed to an audience in a social setting. Both of these perspectives on narrative are focused on the narrative of a single speaker. In the third perspective, personal narrative as conversational interaction, the emphasis is on how personal narrative occurs in an ongoing conversation in every day life through conversational analysis.

Fourthly, narrative analysis as a social process looks at the social uses of narratives by different speech communities and considers narrative as a type of discourse. In this perspective the larger social processes of a speech community are examined through the techniques of conversational analysis. In the final perspective, personal narrative as political praxis, Langellier suggests that the emphasis is on the political function of narrative and an analysis of the deep structure and meanings embedded within the text.

As with feminist personal narratives generally, one of the distinguishing aspects of narrative analysis is the importance placed on the role of the researcher. Riessman (1993) suggests that the “analyst creates a metastory about what happened by telling what the interview narratives signify, editing and reshaping what was told, and turning it into a hybrid story” (p. 13). Aldridge (1993) advocates a shift from the actual knowledge that is produced to the producer of that knowledge so that the interpretation and understanding of the researcher is opened up for examination. Temple (1994) argues that “it is what is important to the researcher which ends up on paper; and in this sense not only every life history but also every other kind of research report can to some extent be seen as an autobiographical product of the researcher” (p. 48). Borland (1991) concurs:

We identify chunks of artful talk within this flow of conversation, give them physical existence (most often through writing), and embed them in a new context of expressive or at least communicative activity (usually the scholarly

article aimed toward an audience of professional peers). Thus, we construct a second-level narrative based upon, but at the same time reshaping, the first. (p. 63)

Personal narrative as political praxis is the most relevant form of analysis for this research and is combined with specific attention to the researcher's narrative analysis. Both of these perspectives are now discussed in more detail.

6.3.1 Personal Narrative as Political Praxis

Langellier (1989) argues that the form of analysis, 'personal narrative as political praxis' involves an analysis that focuses on deep, rather than surface, structure and meaning, particularly in relation to the political nature of the narrative:

Personal narratives are defined by their political function rather than their formal features, performance, interactional structure, or social process. All personal narratives have a political function in that they produce a certain way of seeing the world which privileges certain interests (stories and meanings) over others, regardless of whether or not they contain explicit political content. The unmasking of ideology in personal narrative requires an analysis of deep rather than surface structure and meanings, within a discursive field of multiple texts and participants. Personal narrative as discourse relates language, social institutions, power, and subjectivity. (pp. 270-271)

As with other forms of personal narrative, the focus is on the formation of meaning through narrative and the ways in which experience is organised through the telling of a story (Langellier, 1989). However, in this perspective there is a deeper level of meaning that is explored in relation to the role that these narratives play in legitimating or resisting dominant forms of reality; hence, the political function of narrative (Langellier, 1989). As Langellier states:

Thus, all personal narratives are ideological because they evolve from a structure of power relations and simultaneously produce, maintain, and reproduce that power structure. From this perspective, the political function of narrative is neither supplementary to other perspectives, auxiliary, nor optional. A political function obtains for all narratives, whether or not they contain explicit political content. (p. 267)

In this sense, all personal narratives exist within discursive fields, even when the object of analysis is a single text or conversation (Langellier, 1989). Therefore, narrative analysis from this perspective recognises that "the complex interplay of particular narratives and discursive fields suggests that there are multiple dominant and multiple subordinate subject positions rather than one dominant-subordinate relationship" (Langellier, p. 267).

This perspective stresses the situatedness of the narrative in terms of its location within a particular context. Langellier (1989) suggests that this “political question of whose interest a personal narrative serves cannot be answered universally nor outside a particular performer/audience, text/context, and researcher/researched relationship. Thus the unit of analysis is particularised, embodied, material, and concrete” (p. 267). There is a recognition that this ideological and political function of narrative can be used to “legitimate the meaning systems of dominant groups and the *status quo* of habitual and established practice, [however] they may also *delegitimate* or *contest* dominant meaning systems” (Langellier, p. 268).

This perspective also relates to Richardson’s (1990) notions of the collective story and the cultural story, as previously discussed. The cultural story legitimates the dominant social discourse, whereas the collective story may connect the individual story with the larger social discourse in a way that the dominant cultural narrative is resisted through the telling of alternative stories (Richardson, 1990). As Richardson explains:

The collective story displays an individual’s story by narrativising the experiences of the social category to which the individual belongs, rather than by telling the particular individual’s story or by simply retelling the cultural story. (p. 128)

Several other authors share the view of the political nature of narrative and the notion that personal narratives reflect either resistance to, or legitimation of, the dominant social discourse (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Gluck & Patai, 1991; Personal Narratives Group, 1989). The Personal Narratives Group (1989) discusses the ways in which women’s narratives often reflect an acceptance of the social system while others reflect a form of resistance that challenges many of the established norms and practices of society. Anderson and Jack suggest that stories are most commonly told on two levels - dominant and/or subverted messages:

Other forms of narrative can provide insights of a different nature. Many women’s personal narratives unfold within the framework of an apparent acceptance of social norms and expectations but nevertheless describe strategies and activities that challenge those same norms. (p. 7)

These models of narrative build on the importance of connecting individual narrators’ stories to broader social and political discourses and exploring the ways in which marginalised voices, speaking about their everyday experiences and lives, provide insight into and challenge established social processes and discourses.

6.3.2 Researcher's Narrative Analysis

The construction of any work bears the mark of the person who created it. (Riessman, 1993, p. v)

The nature of narrative analysis relies, to a significant degree, on the reflections and insight of the researcher. The research relationship influences the nature of the information collected and the researcher will undoubtedly impose some elements of their own story onto the stories of others (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993). As Riessman (1993) argues:

Meaning is ambiguous because it arises out of a process of interaction between people: self, teller, listener and recorder, analyst, and reader. Although the goal may be to tell the whole truth, our narratives about others' narratives are our worldly creations... Meaning is fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal. All we have is talk and texts that represent reality partially, selectively, and imperfectly. (p. 15)

While the researcher's account is undoubtedly privileged over the research participant's narrative, Riessman (1993) argues that "the challenge is to find ways of working with texts so the original narrator is not effaced, so she does not lose control over her words" (p. 34). Acker et al. (1991) suggest that "the question becomes how to produce an analysis which goes beyond the experience of the researched while still granting them full subjectivity. How do we explain the lives of others without violating their reality?" (p. 142). One of the controversial elements about the process of analysis relates to those situations where as researchers, our understanding differs from that of the research participant; those instances where "our aims in pointing out certain features, or in making connections between the narrative and larger cultural formations, may at times differ from the original narrator's intentions" (Borland, 1991, p. 64). Borland continues:

From my own perspective ... the story does not really become a story until it is actualised in the mind of a receptive listener/reader. As my consciousness has been formed within a different social and historical reality, I cannot restrict my reading to a recuperation of original authorial intentions. I offer instead a different reading, one that values her story as an example to feminists of one woman's strategy for combating a limiting patriarchal ideology. (p. 70)

Haggis (1990) discusses the different ways in which 'her voice' is incorporated into her research project. This includes her role in the readings of the primary accounts (oral history); the ways in which this reading then takes additional form around the interests that she holds and therefore the ways in which she chooses to write the text; and incorporated into both of these points is her thematic interests "which are already

shaping the questions I ask, relevance I give, and reasons for my research and the material I am using” (p. 77).

Therefore, while researchers and analysts shape the information received, this occurs in order to address the essential questions that motivate the research. For example, Riessman (1993) states:

Ultimately, of course, the features of an informant’s narrative account an investigator chooses to write about are linked to the evolving research question, theoretical/epistemological positions the investigator values, and, more often than not, her personal biography. If this circularity makes some readers uncomfortable, I can only offer the comfort of a long tradition of interpretive and hermeneutic inquiry. Close analysis of narrative derives legitimation from this tradition and also extends it in new ways. (p. 61)

In the process of making meaning from research participants’ stories the researcher exposes their own processes and procedures, including recognition of the ways in which the resulting document is ‘our’ reflection on this larger process. In general, these processes in the research are also located within a broader field of scholarly work and are therefore “grounded in the consensual rules of the relevant knowledge community rather than in transcendent standards” (Stivers, 1993, p. 410). Stivers argues that this ensures that feminists “can say coherently that individual, contextual accounts such as are found in personal narratives are ‘real knowledge’ in as weighty a sense as the knowledge claims of positivism” (p. 410).

Approaching the analysis of research in this way highlights the importance of researcher reflection and interpretation and the ways in which researchers potentially influence the research process and findings. However, this remains an area of controversy given the continuing dominance of positivist views of researcher detachment and objective analysis. For Richardson (1990) though, “what social scientific writing has tried unsuccessfully to keep out of its writing may very well be the proper approach and subject matter of the discipline” (p. 133). Proponents of feminist narrative analysis advocate a changed relationship with the questions of interpretation and validity by suggesting that “the more unspoken our values and assumptions remain, the more we are in danger of an act of pure imposition” (O’Rourke & Batsleer, 1987, p. 38). These issues will be briefly addressed in the following section.

6.4 Narrative Analysis: Interpretation and Validity

With the exception of liberal feminism, feminist methodologies challenge the basic propositions of positivism. The notion that knowledge can be objective and that research can and should be designed to produce objective, valid and 'true' knowledge is highly contested within much of feminism. In the narrative approach the very nature of objective knowledge as defined by positivism is reconceptualised. As Harding (1987) argues:

Introducing this "subjective" element into the analysis in fact increases the objectivity of the research and decreases the "objectivism" which hides this kind of evidence from the public. (p. 9)

One of the criticisms of narrative as a research method is the suggestion that it is unable to generate true and valid knowledge. However, Riessman (1993) argues that the truth is being told during the narrative process despite the words being said; people are telling the truth of their experiences but in this sense truth cannot be proven empirically. The Personal Narratives Group (1989) extends this point:

When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they *are* revealing truths. These truths don't reveal the past "as it actually was", aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences. They aren't the result of empirical research or the logic of mathematical deductions. Unlike the reassuring Truth of the scientific ideal, the truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them. (p. 261)

It is the ways in which these 'truths' are contextual and located within real life experiences that make them valuable insights into personal and social life (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). The value of these narratives is actually their "subjectivity - their rootedness in time, place, and personal experience, and their perspective-ridden character..." (Personal Narratives Group, p. 263-264).

While the researcher has access to information about "life experiences, subjectivity, individual choices, the rational and conscious motives for actions" Burgos (1989) points out that "it is nonetheless a means to interpretation, rather than a self-sufficient statement of truth" (p. 29). Riessman (1993) argues that interpretation is an essential part of narrative analysis given that narratives are only representations and there is no distinction between fact and interpretation. Geiger (1986) suggests that "although a serious researcher must critically examine all her sources for possible biases or

distortions, the issue of subjectivity does not itself constitute reason for disregarding the data available in life history narratives” (p. 338). As Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) point out:

Interpretation then becomes revealed as the key methodological step in this process of attempting to link data and social relationships. A number of factors interact in unpredictable ways in any process of interpretation: feminist theory and political values, the standpoint and subjectivity of the researcher, the social event of the interview, the ways in which interviewees formulate their accounts on that occasion, and their own standpoints and values. ...This process of interpretation ... is both positive and creative, but also flawed in the sense that we can never be sure that we have got it right. (p. 145)

However, the whole process of interpretation is “a political, contested and unstable process between the lives of the researchers and those of the researched” (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994, p. 127). Holland and Ramazanoglu go on to state:

Feminists have had to accept that there is no technique of analysis or methodological logic that can neutralise the social nature of interpretation. We cannot read meaning *in* interview texts, allowing them to propose their own meanings, without also reading meaning *into* them, as we make sense of their meanings. Feminist researchers can only try to explain the grounds on which selective interpretations have been made by making explicit the process of decision-making which produces the interpretation, and the logic of method on which these decisions are based. This entails acknowledging complexity and contradiction which may be beyond the interpreter’s experience, and recognising the possibility of silences and absences in their data. (p. 133)

The tension that exists between universalising and relativising our conclusions is apparent here. While interpretation is a problematic process, feminist researchers have argued that this does not necessitate a disempowering relativism and argue that “experience remains one essential and informative source of validity which is open to reflexive interpretation (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994, p. 143).

Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) outline three positions that may be taken in relation to the validity of research conclusions. In the first position “interpretation can be seen as a process which can be contaminated by failure to control the subjective, political, personal” (p. 143) where it is suggested that reality can be discovered if correct procedures are employed. Feminisms have critiqued this approach arguing that in this position “the ‘truths’ produced are overwhelmingly the ‘truths’ of patriarchal societies which render women’s experience marginal, deviant or trivial” (Holland & Ramazanoglu, p. 143).

The second position advanced, influenced by postmodernist ideas, rejects these propositions about the nature of truth and in turn takes a relativist view of the interview situation where “interview transcripts and comparable texts cannot reflect reality since we have no way of knowing the relationships between truth and the interview text” and therefore, these “are accounts in which people present themselves to specific audiences” (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994, p. 144). In reaction to this position, Holland and Ramazanoglu suggest:

What is problematic here is that this relativist view of women’s lives producing many truths does not fully acknowledge the factors influencing researchers’ interpretations of women’s lives and women’s diversity. Feminist researchers who interview others to produce feminist knowledge can never simply allow the experience of the other to speak for itself (this would be publication rather than research - which is important but different). To treat what people say to interviewers simply as textual leaves us unable to show how we have come to any conclusions. It does not expose interpretation as a social process, or the relevant “relations of ruling”, in deciding between possible notions of what is there. (p. 144)

Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) advocate a third position arguing that it more accurately reflects feminist approaches to methodology. This position clearly states the process that the researcher has used in coming to their conclusions and the issues and difficulties that have been experienced in this process (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994). They state:

The middle way is then first to claim that there is some level of reality which can be accessed through people’s accounts, but also to accept that there is no precise solution as to exactly *how* this can be done. Ultimately we do not know whether or not we have done it. (p. 145)

One of the key elements in this approach is the commitment of the researcher to critically reflect on the process of production of the research and the role of the researcher. By exposing these issues, the knowledge that is generated is situated, contextual and yet also relevant and meaningful. What is required of researchers therefore, is to be more conscious and reflective about the conclusions made (Riessman, 1993) by continually being aware of researcher subjectivity and reflecting on processes for analysis (Lieblich, 1994). As the Personal Narratives Group (1989) states:

Only by attending to the conditions which create these narratives, the forms that guide them, and the relationships that produce them are we able to understand what is communicated in a personal narrative. These angles of interpretation not only provide different perspectives but reveal multiple truths of a life. (p. 262)

The Personal Narratives Group (1989) suggests that the “expectations and understandings that the interpreter herself brings to the life story are themselves an essential element in the contextualisation of personal narratives” (p. 22). However, it is clearly a complex and difficult task to ensure an honest and accurate reflection at all times. As Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) argue:

Feminists can aim at reflexivity, in the sense of continuous critical reflection on the research processes we use to produce knowledge. These aims, however, are not necessarily (or ever?) realised as we might wish. As systematic self-knowledge is not easily available, we cannot break out of the social constraints on our ways of knowing simply by wanting to. A continuous critique of research conclusions is required from those whose standpoints differ from our own. (p. 133)

Therefore, a reconceptualisation of the notion of validity is required given that validity as we have come to understand it from the perspective of positivism does not apply in the area of narrative. Riessman (1993) states:

Validation, the process through which we make claims for the trustworthiness of our interpretations, is the critical issue. “Trustworthiness” not “truth” is a key semantic difference: The latter assumes an objective reality, whereas the former moves the process into the social world. (p. 65)

Riessman (1993) suggests four ways in which validation can be approached in narrative analysis including:

- persuasiveness (the degree to which the interpretation is reasonable and convincing);
- correspondence (recognising the desirability of taking our analysis back to those who were involved as participants);
- coherence (the clarity of our argument);
- pragmatic use (the extent to which the work might be of use to other researchers).

In this process of validation, Riessman (1993) suggests that researchers should be able to describe how interpretations were produced, make visible what occurred in the research process, specify how successive transformations were achieved, and make primary data available.

This relates to Stanley's (1992; 1993a; 1993b; Stanley & Wise, 1990; 1993) concept of 'intellectual auto/biography' and the importance of acknowledging the partial and limited nature of our interpretations. Stanley (1992) suggests that a researcher is:

... a socially-located person, one who is sexed, raced, classed, aged, to mention no more, and is so every bit as much as an autobiographer is. And once we accept that ideas are not unique but socially produced even if individually expressed by members of particular social, cultural and political milieux, then we can also extrapolate this to the ideas and interpretations produced by the biographer: *any* biographer's view is a socially located and necessarily partial one. (p. 7)

Stanley (1992) argues that the researcher must share their biography/story as part of the process of validation and that "biographers should not only make available to readers as much of the evidence, and of different kinds, that they work from as possible, but also an account of what facts, opinions and interpretations they find preferable and why: their 'intellectual biography' for this period of time" (pp. 9-10).

6.5 Relevance for this Research

Feminist personal narrative shares a focus on the primary themes of this thesis – possibilities for social change through the reconceptualisation of subjectivity both in relation to knowledge generation and the relationship between individuals and society. The framework for the research process as outlined here is consistent with standpoint theory in its attempt to capture the specific and partial perspectives of young people and youth workers.

Narrative will be used in several different forms in this research, drawing on the work of Langellier (1989) and Richardson (1990).

- Firstly, research participants are engaged in a process of sharing their personal or autobiographical narrative in the research process, utilising feminist personal narrative.
- Secondly, this research explores the biographical aspect of narrative through my capacity to relate to, and present the stories told to me by the research participants.

- Thirdly, I employ Langellier's (1989) notion of 'personal narrative as political praxis' to inform my analysis of the transcripts. This also relates to and draws on Richardson's (1990) concepts of the cultural narrative, in terms of attention to the ways in which the stories presented reinforce the dominant cultural story; and the collective narrative, in promoting the voices of those people who are attempting to tell a different story which might challenge the dominant cultural story - a liberation narrative.
- Fourthly, I approach the writing of the thesis and specifically the chapters detailing the stories from the research, as a form of researcher narrative, or autobiographical narrative, in recognition that the overall meaning-making of the analysis and the writing of the final document is my narrative of the research process.

6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the methodological framework for this research, feminist personal narrative, through an exploration of relevant literature within feminism. Feminist personal narrative is particularly relevant for this research given the emphasis placed on the relationship between individuals and society, the role of the researcher, and possibilities for change. The ways in which narrative is applied to this research has been outlined. The following chapter focuses on the detailed application of the methodological framework.

CHAPTER SEVEN

METHOD

7.1 Introduction

This research utilises a feminist personal narrative methodology. Four young people and five youth workers participated in the research and shared their personal narrative through dialogue, the use of creative processes, co-structural analysis, and reflection on the research process. The researcher's story is interwoven throughout the research. This involves reflection on my own life story, my professional practice and role as researcher. All sessions with research participants were audio taped and the tapes then transcribed. These transcriptions were then provided to research participants and referred to throughout our interactions. The analysis included a series of processes designed to provide a multi-layered analysis of the information collected. Aspects of the analysis included collaborative analysis involving research participants and narrative analysis. As previously mentioned, the analysis process included a significant reconceptualisation of the direction of the research.

This chapter provides an in-depth description of the research method. There are seven major sections in this chapter commencing with an overview of the recruitment of research participants followed by a discussion of the ethical considerations in the research, the use of feminist personal narratives and the six stages of the research process, a description of the research setting, the multiple stages of analysis in the research, and finally, a discussion on the limitations of the research.

7.2 Research Participants

Given the practice origins of this research in the field of youth work, I sought to involve young people and youth workers in the personal narrative process. My aim was to promote the richness in the individual stories of young people/youth workers as they discussed issues of relevance to their lives/practice.

7.2.1 Recruitment of Youth Workers

Youth workers' participation in the research related primarily to reflection on professional practice with a view to how change for young people might be facilitated¹.

Youth workers were recruited in three ways.

1. Letters were sent to all major youth services in South-east Queensland explaining the nature of the research and inviting interested workers to contact for more information.
2. An advertisement was placed in the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland newsletter which has a state-wide circulation.²
3. Networking was undertaken with youth workers who passed on information about the research to other interested workers.

Interested workers were required to meet several criteria in order to be eligible to participate in the research:

1. To be prepared to commit a significant amount of time to the research process, approximately 2 hours a fortnight over 5-7 months;
2. To be located within reasonable travelling distance of Brisbane;
3. To be currently engaged in direct work with marginalised young people;
4. To have an interest in the aims of the research (specifically the social change agenda of the research);
5. To be prepared to inform their employer of their participation (given that discussions may relate to workplace issues at times).

Twelve workers expressed interest in the research and received information from me, both written and verbally. (Refer to Appendix A for copy of letter sent to workers). Five workers subsequently contacted and agreed to participate.

7.2.2 Recruitment of Young People

Young people's participation related to the sharing of their personal life stories. Typically such stories are characterised by childhood trauma, abuse and/or neglect. Given the different expectations of young people's involvement in the research, the

¹ Youth workers shared very intimate details about their early lives and recounted very painful and traumatic events that had occurred. I saw this as a feature of our ongoing (positive) relationship rather than as a requirement of the research.

² The Youth Affairs Network of Queensland is the peak body representing community based non-government youth services in Queensland.

recruitment phase for young people was significantly more difficult and time-consuming. In light of the sensitive nature of my request I initially approached young people with whom I had previously had a professional relationship as a youth worker, and with whom I was still in contact (although no longer in a professional capacity).³ These young people had previously indicated an interest in being involved in this research. Of the four young people who participated in the research I had had a previous working relationship with two of them.⁴

In addition to this I approached other youth workers with whom I was in contact to explain the nature of my research and ask if they knew of any young people who may be interested. I also asked the youth workers who had agreed to participate in the research if they might refer any young people. As a result of this a further two young people agreed to participate.

Three young people who initially expressed interest chose not to participate after finding out more about the research. I had contact with approximately six additional young people who initially agreed to participate but for a variety of reasons were unable to do so. One of the contributing reasons was the difficulty in maintaining contact with some young people given their changing circumstances. For example, one young person who had agreed to participate was sent to jail the day before we were due to begin our first formal session together; one young person moved interstate unexpectedly after our first series of meetings; and several other young people were unable to be contacted after our initial meetings, presumably having changed address.

7.2.3 Representativeness of Research Participants

It was not the intention of this research to gather a representative sample of young people and youth workers in Brisbane. However, I was mindful to ensure, as much as practically possible, that participants brought a diverse range of experiences to the

³ It should be noted that I also had previous relationships with over half the youth workers who participated in the research. This was unavoidable given my long association with the youth work field and the relatively small number of youth workers employed in South-east Queensland.

⁴ In some ways I believe that this assisted the research process and facilitated the young people's participation; however, in other ways I believe it was a more complex relationship given that previous issues in these relationships influenced the research process in ways that I had not anticipated. For example, I believe that one young person participated because it was a way of having more consistent, ongoing contact, rather than because they were at a point in their lives where sharing this deeply personal information was possible and desirable for them. Hence, there was a great deal of resistance, and at times anger expressed at the questions I would ask.

research given the focus on the life stories of marginalised and disadvantaged young people.

Without specific action on my part, there was significant diversity among research participants: some participants came from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; some were women who had experienced extreme discrimination, sexual abuse and domestic violence (as had some of the male participants); some had been homeless; some had experience with drug use and other forms of substance abuse; most had participated in some form of self harming behaviour, often inflicting serious physical injuries on themselves; some had been offenders and incarcerated; some were gay/lesbian; some had worked in the sex industry; some had grown up in rural areas; etc. Youth workers also brought a diversity of experience in working with young people in many different settings.⁵

The only area of proactive recruitment on my part was in relation to the participation of Indigenous young people and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. I did not wish for this research to exclude and further marginalise either group, however I was also aware of the dangers of co-opting people from other cultures, particularly Indigenous people, into an anglocentric research process. In an attempt to diminish this danger I liaised with workers in both fields in regard to the cultural appropriateness of this research and minor modifications to the methodology were made as a result of these meetings⁶.

Over the course of the next eight months I attempted to negotiate the involvement of Indigenous young people and youth workers, however this was not successful and remains a point of great disappointment in this research. While I did gain the

⁵ It should be noted that the distinction between young people and youth workers in relation to such criteria is a tentative one given that many youth workers had also had oppressive and marginalising experiences, very similar to these young people, and often shared these experiences in the research process.

⁶ For example, Indigenous young people were encouraged to bring a support person to the sessions if they so desired; sessions were to be briefer in overall duration; and I was willing to travel significantly longer distances to access young people in their own environments.

participation of a non-English speaking background youth worker, my attempts to involve a non-English speaking background young person were also not successful.⁷

7.3 Ethical Issues

Ethical clearance was obtained for this research through The University of Queensland Behavioural and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee. Participants were provided with Information Sheets providing general information about the research and detailing the responsibilities of the researcher and their rights as research participants. (Refer to Appendix B and C for copies of Information Sheets). Participants were also provided with a copy of a Consent Form and asked to read and consider this prior to signing. (Refer to Appendix D and E for copies of the Consent Forms). Young people were encouraged to discuss their participation with a support person prior to signing the consent form.

7.3.1 Disclosure of Personal Information

Given the nature of the research it was critical that the research process proceed sensitively and slowly. As the researcher, I was conscious of the potential difficulties in disclosing highly personal material. The importance of developing a supportive relationship with research participants was acknowledged, as was the value in providing consistent opportunities for research participants to process their experiences in the context of our relationship. In the event that participants required further input, I was able to refer them to an appropriate counsellor.⁸ I recognised the importance of debriefing and ensured, as much as possible, that participants did not leave while still feeling intensely about issues raised during our time together. Time for debriefing and relaxing together at the end of a session was scheduled into the plan for each session.

⁷ There may be several reasons to explain this. While a full discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this research, my initial observation was that many Indigenous people and many people from other cultures value and respect the relational aspects of interactions and therefore are less likely to engage with someone outside their community who is not known to them or with whom they do not have a relationship.

⁸ Although this did not eventuate I believe that all of the young people who participated benefited from having significant support from other workers, outside the research situation.

7.3.2 Confidentiality

The nature of confidentiality and participants' rights in the research project were detailed in the Consent Forms and the Information Sheets, as well as in discussion with me. Participants were informed that names and any other identifying information would remain strictly confidential and that information used in the final research document would be presented in such a way that the identities of participants were undetectable.

7.3.3 Participant's Rights

There were several important elements detailed in the Information Sheets in relation to the rights of participants in this research:

- participation was voluntary;
- participants had control over their involvement and could refuse to discuss any issue;
- participants could discontinue their involvement at any time without reason or notice;
- participants could withdraw any or all of their information at any time;
- participants could ask for reports on the progress of the thesis and will be provided with a summary of the research at the completion of the project.

7.4 Information Gathering – Feminist Personal Narratives

The process of gathering information in this research involved six distinct stages with each stage including specific aims and actions. Each interaction with research participants was taped and transcriptions of sessions were passed on to research participants to check for accuracy and to identify any additional information they wished to contribute. These transcripts were referred to throughout the personal narrative process.

7.4.1 Stage One

This stage involved initial meetings with research participants for the purpose of introducing and discussing the nature of the research and beginning to build relationships with participants. The importance of establishing rapport and beginning to build a relationship that facilitates the person's participation in the research is acknowledged as an important part of the research process (Douglas, 1985; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Minichiello, Aroni, Timewall & Alexander, 1990).

Copies of the Information Sheets and Consent Forms were provided prior to these meetings and issues raised in these documents were clarified and discussed.

The duration of this stage differed among participants and between youth workers and young people. For young people, this was a critical stage in the research process where the focus was on building a relationship that might facilitate their participation in the research process. This stage involved a minimum of five meetings with each young person. The research process was discussed and information provided about myself, my life and work, and my motivations for undertaking this research. Once the young person had decided to participate in the research we continued meeting and building our relationship. I encouraged them to talk in a beginning way about their lives and their decision to participate in the research.

While I undertook a similar process with youth workers, it was much briefer given the different nature of their participation in the research. For youth workers, this stage involved two meetings, with the first meeting focusing on the information contained in the relevant documents I had provided. The second meeting was arranged after the youth worker had decided to participate in the research to clarify any remaining questions.

7.4.2 Stage Two

Stage two involved participants sharing their personal/professional stories through the use of feminist personal narrative processes and the use of creative arts strategies designed to encourage different levels of expression. This stage involved two to three meetings with participants, with meeting times ranging from two hours to five hours, as determined by each participant.

I approached these sessions using a recursive model of interviewing where the natural flow of conversation was valued (Minichiello et al., 1990). The importance of this approach is that it allowed me to regard each research encounter as unique rather than adhering to a fixed format (Minichiello et al., 1990).

Young people were asked to reflect on their lives in whatever form they chose (e.g. chronologically, significant events, etc.). I also asked a range of questions about other

family members, houses they had lived in at different times in their lives, peers, school, etc. I was particularly interested in the impact that their experiences had had on their sense of self and how they regarded the world, and I regularly asked questions related to this theme. Issues I sought to raise included:

- Significant events/memories in childhood and adolescence
- Relationships with parents and siblings
- Effect of these experiences on your feelings about yourself
- What did you need that could have made a difference then?
- Any significant other people?
- School
- Peers
- Experiences as an adolescent.

Where memories were painful and difficult, I encouraged each young person to discuss only what they felt safe to disclose. While I encouraged participants to set the direction of the session, I often asked clarifying questions or sought additional information.

The process with youth workers was very similar to the process for young people. However, the purpose of these sessions was clearly different in that the focus of discussion was reflection on their youth work practice, how they understood the nature of their youth work practice, their reasons for becoming youth workers, the purpose and characteristics of their practice, organisational issues, etc. Questions related to the following areas:

- Early life and connection to current work
- Decision to do welfare/youth work
- Characteristics of youth work approach
- Frustrations and difficulties in practice
- Limitations on practice organisationally
- Practice issues to change or build upon
- Example of a piece of practice that went well and one that you would change.

Interestingly, all youth workers, to varying degrees, spoke about their family of origin and their early life experiences and the impact that this had had on their decision to pursue a career as a youth worker/social worker. Many youth workers talked openly

about their sense of self and the factors that had influenced this over their lives. There were significant similarities in the information shared between young people and youth workers.

7.4.3 Stage Three

At Stage Three, participants were given an opportunity to reflect on their experience of the research thus far. There were two aspects to this stage. Firstly, I provided an opportunity for participants to depict the life story they had related at Stage Two in a non-verbal form. I was hopeful that the use of creative processes would access some of the more 'unspoken' parts of their story.

The creative process used for young people and youth workers differed. For young people, I provided an array of art materials (paints, crayons, pencils, pens, glitter, feathers, etc) and asked them to create an image that represented their life story. Only one young person was able to complete this activity. Of the three young people who did not, one young person said he did not feel comfortable to do it; one was in jail and felt it would 'look bad', and the other said she would be more comfortable to use a different medium such as poetry. (Refer to Appendix F for photograph of this image).

With youth workers, I asked them to bring into this session some object/s that were metaphors for their practice. Only one youth worker chose not to participate in this activity.

My interest and experience in the use of creative processes comes from my use of these strategies in therapeutic settings, in both individual counselling and group work. The benefit of creative processes in these settings is increasingly acknowledged and documented, especially within feminist counselling practice (Butler & Wintram, 1991; Dokter, 1994; Ernst & Goodison, 1981; Holden, Porter, Renfree & Smith, 1996; Hornyak & Baker, 1989; Krzowski & Land, 1988; Liebmann, 1986; Linnell and Cora, 1993; Manning, 1993; Schaverien, 1989). While there has been little written regarding the use of creative processes in research settings I believe the effective use of these strategies in this research process lends some weight to their usefulness as methodological strategies in research⁹.

⁹ However, the difficulties experienced in gaining research participants involvement in these activities is noted and may constitute a deficit in the use of these strategies as research tools.

Secondly, I asked participants to reflect verbally on the process of the research and how they were experiencing it. I was interested in the nature of the methodology as a research question in its own right¹⁰ and sought feedback from research participants in terms of how this was experienced by them. I was also open to adjusting the methodology based on participants' feedback. The following questions were explored in this session:

- How have you experienced the research?
- What would you change?
- How would/have you described it to someone else?
- Most significant memory?
- Any learning?

7.4.4 Stage Four

In this stage the research participants and I engaged in a co-structural analysis by exploring their individual story in light of the broader social context. The transcripts of previous sessions were referred to and used as a catalyst for our discussions. This stage involved three to four sessions and was interrelated with Stage Five. Discussion referred to their understanding of the nature of society, how they would describe our society to someone from 'another world', what characterises society, how they understand the social processes that marginalise some (with particular attention to the position of young people in society), how the things that have happened to them relate to the broader society and how it works, etc. The following questions were discussed:

- How do you understand the sort of society we have and how it works?
- How do you understand the position of young people in society?
- Why do some young people live like this?
- How does this relate to the sort of society we have?
- How are these things maintained?
- What stops all of this changing?
- How do you think individual people are connected to society?

These discussions moved from the macro (understandings of society) to the micro (understandings of self in society). This was a very interactive stage of the research and

¹⁰ Part of the concern of this thesis is the relationship between theory and practice and the ways in which different methodologies generate different knowledges. In particular I am concerned with the capacity for generating system-challenging knowledge in research.

participants, both young people and youth workers, actively engaged with these issues over several sessions.

7.4.5 Stage Five

Stage Five was an extension of Stage Four exploring the implications of the analysis for action and change. A central focus was the ways in which change may occur in society, especially in relation to young people and the possibilities for emancipatory practice. Both personal and social change possibilities were explored by asking specific questions about change possibilities for them personally (and professionally) through to exploring their ideas about broader social change and strategies for achieving this. I asked the young people who participated to imagine that they had an audience with people in positions of power in society and then to think of the most important things to convey to them. I asked the youth workers to imagine an audience of potential youth workers and what they would say about quality youth work practice. This stage usually involved one to two specific sessions.

Questions covered in sessions with young people included:

- What could have happened in your life to make a difference?
- What would you like to say to youth workers about how they should work with young people?
- What youth work practices might lead to change on a broader scale?
- What would you like to say to people in positions of power in society about how things should change?
- Any other ideas about how things might be different for yourself or other young people?

Questions covered in sessions with youth workers included:

- How consistent is your practice with your analysis of the sort of society we have?
- How is your practice most influenced or confined by the social system?
- What youth work practices might lead to change on a broader scale?
- Think of an example of a piece of work where you believe your actions challenged the structures and one where they may have reinforced them.
- How do you think the overall situation for young people could change?

- What sorts of changes would you like to make in your practice?
- How would you describe the sort of practice you would recommend to someone new who was interested in working with young people?

7.4.6 Stage Six

The final stage provided another opportunity for participant reflection specifically on the research process through dialogue and the use of creative strategies. For example, research participants were offered the opportunity to develop a piece of art, or write a story/poem depicting their experience in the research. Again, in this stage I was interested in hearing from research participants about their experience of the research process. I asked all participants a range of questions including how they experienced the process generally, things they enjoyed, things they would change, etc. I then also asked all participants to use the creative arts materials provided to depict their experience of the research process. Four participants did not complete this activity¹¹. (Refer to Appendix G for photographs of these images.)

The following questions were used with research participants to evaluate the research process:

- What have you learnt?
- What did you enjoy about the process?
- What would you liked to have changed?
- What would you say to someone who was doing similar research?
- Have you learnt anything?
- Has this research in anyway been a negative or destructive experience for you?

Research participants commenced and completed the research at different times over an eighteen-month period. On average I met with participants twelve times; however, two participants did not complete all stages of the research. Overall I had 92 separate meetings with the nine research participants.

¹¹ Of these four, two participants had exited the research prior to completing this activity; one person declined to participate; one person agreed to do this in her own time but did not recontact.

7.5 The Research Setting

Both the flexible and spontaneous nature of the research environment and the particular conception of the role of the researcher had significant impacts on the research setting.

7.5.1 Flexible Approach

The approach used in these interactions was characterised by continual reflection on the process with opportunities to alter the methodological strategies where this was indicated. Consistent with narrative processes, I would at times alter direction or draw attention to issues or emotions that I was sensing, rather than adhering to a specified format for each interaction (Acker et al., 1991).

Clear guidelines were established to inform the process, however I was committed to creating an environment that I influenced, but did not rigidly control or predetermine (Acker et al., 1991). Research participants were encouraged to be largely self-directing in terms of the content they provided and I hoped for the meaningful participation of the research participants not only in the content but also in the process of the research. However, I had no illusions about the significance of my role and my inevitable impact on the process and direction of the research. In this sense I agree with the experiences of Mirza (1995) who states:

I wanted to pursue interviews in a spirit of reciprocity but in the case of this research this often proved self-deluding because the researcher constructs the research problem, constructs the questions, seeks the relationship with respondents and ultimately determines what happens to the material created. (p. 178)

Throughout the research, researcher reflections on the process and nature of the research were used to influence the direction of the research while it was in process. In this sense I was involved in “an ongoing process of reformulating [my] ideas, examining the validity of [my] assumptions” (Acker et al., 1991, p. 139). Throughout the research encounters I consciously attempted to value my intuition as a researcher and to explore the benefits of “being awake to the intuitive inclinations ever present in fieldwork” (Janesick, 2001, p. 533).

Each stage of the research was influenced by my reflections on the previous stage and by the input of research participants. I was attempting to refine and develop the research

process based on these reflections. In addition to this I was hoping to allow the research to evolve over time.

Therefore the process, as well as the content, of the research became a topic for investigation. For example, through reflecting on the inadequacies of the written transcripts to capture the nature of the encounter, a series of creative processes were designed and introduced in an attempt to recapture the more dynamic and vibrant elements of the research interaction and process.¹²

7.5.2 Researcher Role

In this research the role of the researcher is based on Stanley's (1992; 1993a; 1993b; Stanley & Wise, 1990; 1993) concept of the researcher's intellectual auto/biography where the researcher locates their story as a valuable part of the research material. This occurred both through extensive reflections on the research and the inclusion of my autobiography (both personally and as researcher) as information and therefore, open to analysis.

The three aspects to my role were:

- Researcher – through reflecting and acknowledging the nature of my role as researcher.
- Social work/youth work practitioner - I continued my own youth work practice¹³ and reflected on this in the same way as I required of the youth workers who were participants in this process. Where appropriate I shared these reflections with research participants.
- Reflection on my own life and experiences of growing up - I have used aspects of my own story throughout this thesis and I have shared parts of my story with the research participants when appropriate (i.e. when I believed that some level of self-disclosure might facilitate the dialogue between the research participant and myself, and may potentially take the discussion to a deeper level).

¹² Refer to Stages Three and Six.

¹³ I worked one day a week in a feminist, community-based organisation, Isis: Centre for Women's Action on Eating Issues, providing counselling to young women who experience serious eating disorders.

The strategies employed in this research are consistent with the methodological framework of this research. Feminist personal narrative attempts to challenge positivist approaches to research, particularly in the separation between researcher and research participant. The influence of the researcher's personal, social and political context and experiences is valued and power inequities minimised.

7.6 Analysis

Consistent with narrative analysis generally, the analysis in this research is highly interpretive and focuses on the processes of the research in addition to the content generated. This includes the articulation of the processes by which I have evaluated and interpreted, and therefore reached my conclusions. This approach allows for readers' critical comments and, to some degree, enables them to enter into the arguments developed here and to reach conclusions of their own (Flax, 1990a).

There are three distinct stages of analysis. The first stage (initial analysis) includes researcher reflections and the collaborative analysis with research participants throughout the research process. The second stage documents the reconceptualisation in the method of analysis and provides the grounds for the development of a narrative analysis. The third stage is the narrative analysis of the research process.

7.6.1 Stage One: Initial Analysis

7.6.1.1 Researcher Reflections

Analysis was ongoing through all interviews with participants (Acker et al., 1991). Systematic reflections on each meeting with each research participant were recorded and later transcribed. These ongoing reflections formed an important part of the analysis and constitute in themselves, a process analysis of the research. I agree with Kirkwood (1993) who states: "I have found that my own personal responses to the research I conducted, although at times confusing and painful were integral to forming an analysis of the interview material and to my understanding and use of a feminist approach to researching women" (p. 18).

My reflections were clustered around several core themes:

- understandings of the content being discussed;
- relationships with participants;

- participation as researcher in general;
- the effect I was having on the process and content of the research;
- issues for me in my life and the effect that my sense of self had on the process;
- perceptions of how consistent people's comments were with their other non-verbal behaviours.

This information covers over 170 pages of transcripts and provided a crucial part of the developing analysis. Thesis supervision sessions during this time were used to bring together my reflections about the research process and to establish and identify the general themes and directions of my research. Specific researcher reflections appear in chapter eight.

7.6.1.2 Collaborative Analysis: Co-structural Analysis

This analysis refers to Stage Four of the research process where research participants were involved in an analysis of the material collected so far, specifically analysing the connection between individual and structural issues. I endeavoured to develop a shared process of analysis where together we explored the meaning of their story in a broader context. This was one of the ways in which I attempted to reduce the power imbalances that exist in the relationship between researcher and research participants.

7.6.1.3 Collaborative Analysis: Research Participants' Reflections on the Research Process

This ongoing aspect of the analysis focused specifically on the research process and refers to Stages Three and Six. This information was useful in making minor modifications to the research process at the completion of Stage Three. However, these reflections most significantly informed the analysis of the overall research process.

7.6.2 Stage Two: Reconceptualisation

As previously discussed¹⁴, a number of theoretical issues about the direction of the research culminated in a reconceptualisation of the approach to this research. Specifically in terms of the analysis, initial plans to undertake a thematic analysis in conjunction with the initial analyses detailed in section 7.6.1 were adjusted and a framework for narrative analysis (outlined in chapter six) was developed.

¹⁴ Refer to chapter one, section 1.3.

Riessman (1993) supports such a reconceptualisation and discourages researchers from “tightly specifying a question that they will answer with data from narrative accounts because analytic induction, by definition, causes questions to change and new ones to emerge” (p. 60).

Consistent with my interest in standpoint epistemology and the work of both socialist feminists and third world feminists, I initially envisaged a knowledge generation process which would create new and true theories. During my work with research participants, the nature of truth, in relation to subjectivity and in relation to knowledge, were fundamentally challenged. These challenges are, I believe, consistent with a growing awareness resulting from the postmodern turn. Both issues are briefly outlined here.

7.6.2.1 Research Process and Truth

The research process was an area of much reflection and learning in this research. The most important issue to emerge was the discrepancy between research participants’ verbal and non-verbal accounts. Often research participants expressed different truths in words and non-verbal communication. The written transcript failed to account for the multiple levels of truth apparent in the research situation.

Other authors similarly point out that the written record does not encapsulate the non-verbal dimensions of the interaction. Anderson and Jack (1991) found “discrepancies between our memories of interviews and the transcripts because the meaning we remember hearing had been expressed through intense vocal quality and body language, not through words alone” (p. 12). Mbilinyi (1989) notes how the actual experience gets lost in the written word and states “much will be lost in the written text because reading the written page can never be the same experience as watching a live performance with all of its particular nuances and audience participation.” (p. 217). Gluck (1979) discusses the:

... subtle nuances in the content of the interview and voice inflections - which are captured on tape - there are nonverbal gestures which only the sensitive interviewer.... will observe. These nonverbal cues reveal the emotional tone of the interview and should be carefully noted afterwards; they will become part of the record used by both the interviewee and others to evaluate the validity and reliability of the material recorded. (p. 6)

While significant issues were emerging in the content, meaning changed significantly when reading the transcripts. As I began the analysis, by reading through the transcripts several times looking for significant themes, I was continually taken back to the memory of the interaction - the facial expressions, the body language, the silences, the emotions, the unspoken, the energy, the feelings all of this induced in me; all were available to me, but would not necessarily be for the reader who was not present during the original interaction¹⁵.

These issues arose as inadequacies in the initial analysis of the research when it became evident that a thematic analysis would not capture the complexity of the research encounter. One of the most appealing aspects of the adoption of a narrative analysis for this research was the value placed on the process of the research. Riessman (1993) states:

Analysis in narrative studies opens up the forms of telling about experience, not simply the content to which language refers. We ask, why was the story told *that way*? (p. 2)

7.6.2.2 Subjectivity and Truth

A related deficit of thematic analysis is its inability to account for the subjective processes involved in the development of research themes. Throughout the methodology it was clear to me that the themes I was highlighting were not necessarily THE themes, but rather themes that I was interested in, themes that had some meaning to me and my research interests and questions. A thematic analysis requires an 'objective' reading of the transcripts, a proposition that no longer fits in this research approach. In the analysis I was interested in exploring my subjective interpretation of the transcripts - or rather in *acknowledging* that I was exploring my subjective interpretation of the transcripts, rather than presuming an objective and independent position. Through stressing the importance, and validity, of interpretation, narrative analysis encourages such subjectivity in research.

7.6.3 Stage Three: Narrative Analysis

I have drawn on a variety of sources to assist in the development of the process of my analysis. These sources include literature on narrative analysis and interpretation (Acker et al., 1991; Aldridge, 1993; Borland, 1991; Burgos, 1989; Cotterill & Letherby, 1993;

¹⁵ This information was recorded in my notes/researcher reflections after each session.

Harding, 1987; Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994; Langellier, 1989; Lieblich, 1994; McCabe & Peterson, 1991; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Richardson, 1990; Riessman, 1993; Stivers, 1993; Temple, 1994); understandings about analysis in qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 1998; Huberman & Miles, 1994; Wolcott, 1994); and feminist postmodern writers concerned with issues of subjectivity and interpretation (Flax, 1990a; 1990b; 1993a; Bloom, 1998).

The volume of information collected in this research has made this analysis a difficult process. Dealing with large volumes of data is a concern clearly shared by other researchers. As Acker et al. (1991) state:

Our feminist commitment had led us to collect data that were difficult to analyse and had provided us with so much information that it was difficult to choose what was “essential” at the same time that we tried to give a picture that provided a “totality.” (p. 143)

7.6.3.1 Introduction

Overall, my interpretations in this research have been based on a combination of several aspects of the research and my role as researcher:

- the discussions that occurred between researcher and research participants (as captured by the written transcripts);
- my reflections at that time about the process and non-verbal aspects of the communication (researcher reflections);
- my intuitive, emotional and bodily reaction to the interaction as it was occurring;
- my own experiences in the broader context of my life that I consciously, and unconsciously, draw on as I form my understandings.

I have explored the transcripts for issues of relevance to this research while also paying attention to the emergence of the unanticipated. I have attempted to achieve this by undertaking multiple readings of the transcripts where I read without searching for predetermined themes. In addition to this I utilised information and insights already gained through my ongoing researcher reflections to highlight unanticipated areas of the research.

In relation to the stories, I have used a method of narrative reduction which involves reducing the whole narrative to several core narratives, while preserving the dialogic nature of the narrative. This method is based on Riessman’s (1993) suggestion:

It is naive to think that one can “just present the story” without some systematic method of reduction. The core narrative, a kind of radical surgery, is a way of rendering the ‘whole story’ into a form that allows for comparison. (p. 43)

In this analysis I have paid particular attention to the following key issues:

- what was said in the narrative;
- how it was said;
- what were the consistencies and inconsistencies between what was said and the way it was said;
- what was not said;
- whose interests were being served by telling a particular story in a particular way;
- what role did I play in influencing and constructing these narratives;
- what do these narratives say about issues of domination, oppression and marginalisation in society;
- what do these narratives say about change, both the limitations and possibilities for change.

The most central unanticipated issue to emerge from this analysis relates to notions of subjectivity and selfhood in research participants’ stories and in my reflections as researcher. In subsequent chapters I have paid specific attention to this as a central issue to emerge from the research.

Creswell (1998) suggests that despite the divergence in styles of analysis across all qualitative research, there is a general ‘contour’ that the process of analysis conforms to.

The process of my analysis conformed to Creswell’s suggested contour and included:

- multiple readings of transcripts;
- development of initial narratives;
- establishing criteria of significance;
- development of research stories;
- making sense of stories;
- presenting the analysis.

7.6.3.2 Multiple Readings of Transcripts¹⁶

The first aspect of the analysis involved a general review of all the information collected during the active phase of the research (Creswell, 1998). As suggested by Riessman (1993) I have approached the transcripts by undertaking multiple re-readings to allow for features of the discourse to emerge. I have been particularly interested in the political function of these stories in terms of the way in which research participants, and I as researcher, make meaning in our stories. This involved reading all transcripts several times over a period of many months. I made notes about the developing picture that I was creating and about each specific person's participation in the research. I was particularly attentive to not only the actual written content but also to the process and flow of the interactions.

7.6.3.3 Development of Initial Narratives

In this part of the analysis I attempted to reduce the transcripts to a more manageable form thereby making them more accessible and easier to work with, without losing information or disrupting the flow of the sessions. This involved incorporating relevant information from my reflections on the research. In particular, I was attempting to give attention to other aspects of the interaction such as emotions, body language, relationship dynamics etc. I developed relevant categories in which to sort the information. These categories were based on the specific purpose of each stage of the research (Creswell, 1998). I used the following categories:

- personal story;
- young people's issues generally;
- youth work practice;
- understanding of society;
- social action;
- research reflections;
- process and relationship issues.

7.6.3.4 Establishing Criteria of Significance

This phase of the analysis relates to the process by which I decided what information was significant in the analysis and should be included, and what was not. I established

¹⁶ I am using this term to include the transcripts of all my sessions with research participants as well as the researcher reflections that I made throughout the duration of this phase of the research.

criteria for this process which were determined by the primary purpose of the research combined with an attentiveness to unanticipated findings. These criteria of significance included:

- content that related to the major concerns of the thesis (see categories referred to in previous section);
- recurring themes in the content presented;
- inconsistencies between emotions and words;
- my perception of these inconsistencies;
- process issues that became obvious in their influence of the narrative.

I have been particularly sensitive to the risk of focusing on content that strengthened the points that I wished to make, and attempted to be open to counter positions and perspectives. Flax (1990a) is critical of researchers for “ignoring or repressing certain questions that are germane to their own projects” (p. 5). Consistent with postmodern feminists I have attempted to explore the meanings arising from the research without attempting to construct a unified or homogenised story or metanarrative. As Flax explains:

Given the premise that the Real is always heterogenous and differentiated, it follows that whenever a story appears unified or whole, something must have been suppressed in order to sustain the appearance of unity. Like repressed material in the unconscious, the suppressed within the story does not lose its power; it affects the character of the whole. Recovering the suppressed allows the strains and self-divisions that are an at least equally important part of the story to reappear. This rereading transforms the story’s meaning for us and lessens its hold on or power over us. (pp. 37-38)

7.6.3.5 Development of Research Stories

In this section of the analysis I applied the criteria established in the previous section and constructed a series of stories arising from the research. These stories were separated into three sections:

- personal stories;
- social stories;
- research stories.

Again, these narratives paralleled the specific purposes of each stage of the information gathering process in the research. Personal stories attempted to capture the material

covered in stages one and two; social stories included stages four and five; and research stories covered stages three and six.

As a part of this process, I returned to the original (unedited) transcripts and re-read them alongside the stories I had written to ascertain if the narrative reduction process provided an adequate reflection of the issues to emerge from the research. As a result of this, I made some minor modifications to the stories and included sections of the transcripts that had not previously appeared relevant. This did not however, produce any major changes in the analysis, but rather constituted a ‘check’ of the adequacy of the stories with their original source.

7.6.3.6 Making Sense of the Stories

This phase of the analysis involved the process of stepping back from the stories and searching for broader meanings in what had arisen in the research (Creswell, 1998). This involved linking the stories to the central aims and purposes of the research and exploring the ways in which my understanding of these aims and purposes were furthered through the research. This understanding was also enriched with reference to the literature, specifically literature concerned with subjectivity and agency, and theorising and truth.

7.6.3.7 Presenting the Analysis

I have attempted to write the findings from the research in a way that challenges traditional forms of research writing in recognition that “writing is not simply a ‘true’ representation of an objective ‘reality’; instead, language creates a particular view of reality” (Richardson, 1990, p. 116). Richardson (1988) talks about the postmodern challenge to ‘meta-writing’ by suggesting that the grounds for authority in writing are based on the dichotomy between knower and known, yet the authority in scientific writing is established when no narrator is present therefore giving the illusion of objectivity. Richardson (1988) rejects this dichotomy:

Separating the researcher’s story from the people’s story implies that the researcher’s voice is the authoritative one, a voice that stands *above* the text. But because people have differential access to the use of the authoritative voice - and for the most part the people we study have less access than we do - we may unwittingly colonise, overgeneralise or distort. Further, by objectifying ourselves out of existence, we void our own experiences. We separate our humanity from our work. We create the conditions for our own alienation. (pp. 203-204)

In this writing I have attempted to combine my interpretations (which are clearly dominant) while encouraging participants' voices to speak for themselves through the inclusion of excerpts from the transcripts. This is a similar process to that described by Acker et al. (1991) when they speak of "moving back and forth between letting the data 'speak for itself' and using abstracted categories" (p. 143).

Atkinson (1997) also talks about the need to include the voices of research participants:

Although in a sense it is "my story", I also include other people's stories so that they can represent themselves and, to some extent, stand outside and be separate from my account. Much of my story is about the research *process*, and how the group members came to tell their stories. But it is also an account of my own involvement in the process and how - usually unknowingly - I helped influence its direction. How I presented myself, and how people saw me, appear in retrospect to have been important factors in determining how we got on together, and in shaping what happened. The trouble was, I did not know that at the time. After all, I had a research project to run. (p. 30)

7.7 Limitations of the Research

The early stages of this research project were characterised by the feeling that I was 'flying by the seat of my pants'. As a result I found myself measuring my performance as a researcher through an implicit positivist framework. I agonised over the differences between this work and professional supervision or counselling work, and felt I should be more objective, less involved and less subjective in my role. The decision to approach the methodology from a flexible position, allowing for new directions and approaches to emerge, has generated many unexpected benefits as well as several limitations.

Firstly, the co-structural analysis stage did not proceed as anticipated and was limited in several respects. In this stage I was attempting to make meaning in a way that did not remove the participants' own definitions and control of the content. However, for this process to work participants were required to read all the transcripts before the analysis stage so that we might work on them together. Most people could simply not allocate this amount of time. In addition, the transcripts were often not available for some time after our initial sessions.¹⁷ Also most of the research participants stated that they found it difficult to engage with the transcripts, finding them alienating and meaningless - a

¹⁷ Tapes had to be passed to the transcriber, transcribed, returned to me when I proof read all transcripts while listening to the original tapes - a process that often took 4-6 weeks to complete.

sense that they were not an adequate reflection of the actual process they had participated in.

While my attempts to involve participants in the analysis were consistent with the methodological framework for this research, I had not fully explored the possibilities and limitations of this approach. Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) note some of these benefits and difficulties:

We can imagine an ideal of research as a collaborative interactional process in which the “work” consists of the construction of meanings, with reciprocal inputs from researcher and researched, arriving at agreed conclusions on interpretation of the content, or data of the research. This is an ideal to which some feminists aspire. They seek reciprocity in the research relationship and are sensitive to intrusion into women’s lives; they want to “realise the meanings,” the lifeworld of other women they research, in a way that makes sense for the women themselves. To this end some attempt to involve the researched in the entire research process, starting with setting the agenda for research, undertaking it in a reciprocal relation, through to interpretation and writing-up (or producing some statement) of the results. There is a conflict between the requirements made of a researcher through their membership of an academic or disciplinary community, and the needs and interests of the women they research. (pp. 135-136)

Secondly, the research process used here did not allow for ongoing contact with the research participants during the analysis phase. Riessman (1993) stresses the importance of this stage of ‘correspondence’ in her criteria for the validation of narrative analysis. This research would clearly have benefited from research participants’ reflections on the developing analysis; without this input I was unable to ascertain if the issues that I had determined as significant were shared by research participants. This did not occur because of the time delay between completing the narratives and commencing the analysis¹⁸ and the transient nature of many of the research participants.

Thirdly, I did not make a conscious decision about the format of tape transcription because at that early stage I was relying on the effectiveness of the co-structural analysis and a thematic analysis to make meaning from the research. I was initially naïve about the significance of non-verbal information and its importance in the research analysis. Therefore I inadvertently limited the nature of the analysis that I was able to undertake.

¹⁸ The time delay occurred as a result of the reconceptualisation of the research at this point and the nature of part-time study.

Fourthly, I believe that the research process did not pay sufficient attention to the ways in which elements of people's stories are suppressed. While I engaged in an ongoing critical reflection, I did not have a process for raising the profile of the unspoken aspects of people's stories. Similarly, in the analysis I was unable to accurately determine the extent to which I had captured the suppressed aspects of the story.

7.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the phases of my research process including the selection of research participants, ethical considerations, the stages of the research and the research setting. I have also outlined the process for analysis of the data and the different stages of analysis. There have been major shifts in the approach to this research as evident in the process of analysis as I abandoned my initial plan to engage in a thematic analysis in favour of adopting a narrative analysis. The use of a diverse range of strategies for collecting and analysing the data has, I believe, added additional richness to the data collected.

The following section of the thesis includes three chapters which present the findings from the research. These findings and conclusions are necessarily tentative. Consistent with the transitional nature of social theory and postmodern challenges to knowledge generation, it is no longer desirable to make truth claims as a conclusion to research processes. These findings and conclusions are uniquely mine, though they exist, of course, within a wider community of scholars working in these areas.

Prior to forecasting the next three chapters it will be useful to briefly revisit the basis of this research. The purpose of this research has been to explore the possibilities for agency and social change through a reconceptualisation of subjectivity. In particular I am concerned with the construction of subjectivity and the relationships between past and present experiences, and between individuals and society. However, as previously noted, there has been a substantial transition in thought as the research has progressed. I have located this transition in the broader crisis of representation in social thought, reflective of a shift from modernist to postmodernist approaches to theorising. While the essence of concern in this research has not changed, the perspective from which these issues are viewed has shifted fundamentally.

In chapter eight, 'Subjectivities in Research,' I provide a subjective account of the research process highlighting the importance of the role of the researcher. Chapter nine, 'Constructing Subjectivities,' explores the findings in relation to the construction of subjectivity with particular attention to past experiences and dominant social discourses. Chapter ten, 'Emerging Subjectivities,' focuses on the importance of the concept of 'self' in the research and the issue of researcher and research participants' relationship with self.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SUBJECTIVITIES IN RESEARCH

8.1 Introduction

This is the first of three chapters presenting the findings from this research. As previously discussed, the theoretical transition evident during the course of this research was most pronounced in my work with research participants¹. There are two points of relevance here. Firstly, my (modernist) understanding of both the research process and the data to be generated was challenged. The research did not progress as I had planned nor did I collect the content that I had anticipated would result in a ‘new’ and ‘true’ theory of social change. The research process gave way to a different form of content. Secondly, this data was not only of a different nature, but as I will argue, it was also data that is often both devalued and hidden in research processes, and more importantly, may indeed hold subversive potentialities. It is these insights that have become the primary findings of this research².

In this chapter the issue of subjectivity and research is explored through an examination of my subjective account of the research, including attention to the relationship between researcher and research participants. I commence by briefly re-contextualising the importance of researcher subjectivity in the broader field of postmodern feminist research. The role of the researcher and researcher influence on the research are explored in the following section. The next section looks in detail at issues relating to the relationship between researcher and research participants by focusing on the quality of relationships in the research and my work with two research participants, Elizabeth and Craig³. Background information about each of the research participants and their stories is provided in Appendix H.

¹ Refer to chapter seven, section 7.6.2 ‘Reconceptualisation’, for further details.

² These findings are the culmination of all stages of the multifaceted method of analysis in this research. Where possible, I have provided direct excerpts from the transcript however, given the volume of information collected I have attempted to keep the material as concise as possible. The competing interests of brevity and allowing research participants’ narratives to remain intact have plagued the many drafts of this thesis.

³ All research participants’ names have been altered to ensure confidentiality.

8.2 Subjectivity and Research

This chapter aims to uncover some of the more private issues in conducting research and to redefine them as critical public issues in terms of their influence and relevance in the production of research. Despite scepticism within the wider research community about the appropriateness of exposing these issues, the commitment to highlighting the importance of subjective processes in research and their impact on the production of the research is part of the wider tradition of feminist and postmodern feminist approaches to research (Atkinson, 1997; Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Flax, 1990a; Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994; Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Okely, 1992; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Rosenthal, 1993; Stanley, 1992, 1993a, 1993b; Stanley & Wise, 1990, 1993; Stivers, 1993; Temple, 1994)⁴.

Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) note that “conventionally sociologists say very little about exactly what happened during the course of their research” (p. 128). Maynard and Purvis (1994) suggest that “a focus on autobiographical analyses of what it is actually like to do research can provide a useful insight into issues often hidden in conventional methodology textbooks” (p. 1). Kelly, Burton and Regan (1994) argue that feminists have been “critics of ‘hygienic research’; the censoring out of the mess, confusion and complexity of doing research, so that the accounts bear little or no relation to the real events” (p. 46).

By making the research process transparent the research becomes contextualised with conclusions situated in a set of values, influences and experiences. This relates to Stanley’s (1992, 1993a, 1993b; Stanley & Wise, 1990; 1993) concept of the researcher’s ‘intellectual auto/biography’, previously referred to⁵, where the importance of researcher reflexivity and the researcher’s story is stressed. As Stanley (1993b) notes:

“Reflexivity” here is located in treating one’s self as subject for intellectual inquiry, and it encapsulates the socialised, non-unitary and changing self posited in feminist social thought. (p. 44)

My experience of this research is relevant in that it intersects with research participants’ experiences and more importantly, the influence assumed as researcher determines much about the process and content generated (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993).

⁴ Refer to chapter six, section 6.2.2 ‘The role of the researcher and the research process’ for more information.

⁵ Refer to chapter six section 6.4.

My aim in exposing the more subjective issues in the generation of research also serves an important purpose. I argue in this chapter that the research process was critical in determining the content that was generated between myself and research participants. Over the following two chapters I will extend this argument, suggesting that the insights that emerged were significant in their potential to disturb the dominant discourses of subjectivity and knowledge generation.

There were three elements to this research process which contributed to the generation of these insights.

1. Attention to researcher subjectivity
2. Attention to the relationship between researcher and research participants.
3. Attention to the flexible nature of the research encounter

Each of these three issues will be explored in this chapter through the use of researcher reflections collected throughout the research process and transcripts of the research encounter between myself and research participants⁶.

8.3 Researcher's Reflections

From basic issues such as choice of research question and method, specific styles and approaches, and individual interpretations of material, it is clear that I have played a central role in this research. In line with other feminist researchers (Atkinson, 1997; Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Flax, 1990a; Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994; Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Okely, 1992; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Rosenthal, 1993; Stanley, 1992, 1993a, 1993b; Stanley & Wise, 1990, 1993; Stivers, 1993; Temple, 1994) I argue that the role and influence of the researcher are fundamental aspects of the research encounter and should be consciously and reflectively explored for their contribution to the process of knowledge generation⁷. What follows in this section is a brief exploration of some of what I have considered to be the most critical issues to emerge for me as a researcher throughout this process.

⁶ Refer to chapter seven, section 7.6.1 'Initial Analysis' for more detail about these stages and researcher reflections.

⁷ I do not, of course, advocate that researchers unduly or actively exert their influence over the research process, rather that the inevitable influence is exposed and explored.

8.3.1 Role of the Researcher

My initial aim in my work with research participants was to facilitate a process, for the purpose of collecting information relevant to the themes in the research, whereby participants felt able to share their stories in a safe and supported way. However, in my initial interviews I felt uncertain and confused about the nuances of this role vis-à-vis other roles I assumed in my professional life (e.g. counsellor, professional supervisor). As my research notes reflect:

22nd March: Completed first interview with Jack - feeling unsettled. It's certainly hard work and I'm feeling really uncertain about exactly what I'm doing. I feel confused about whether I'm getting the right information and what the right information would be and who should make that decision.

23rd March: A lot of my feeling at the moment is about the uncertainty of the rules of this game, and of this sort of communication. I don't know whether it is appropriate that I become totally facilitative or more of a counselling style or more of a friendship, in terms of establishing a degree of mutuality. Really confusing. What are the appropriate boundaries or rules - this seems to be totally new and untested ground for me and I don't know whether I'm saying too much (and what the effect of that might be) or not saying enough. What is my role in all of this; how does it differ from other roles that I have like as counsellor, teacher, facilitator, friend, etc?

In reality there were many similarities between these different roles and to some degree my principles and processes as a researcher paralleled my work as a social worker/youth worker. Over time I became clearer about the specific role of researcher.

12th April: I think my role is to be facilitative and to help draw out people's description of their youth work practice or their life experiences generally. I need to recognise that the process I use and the specific issues I choose to focus on are my contribution to the interaction.

7th June: There *is* a difference between this role and my role as counsellor or supervisor. There certainly are also lots of similarities in terms of how I relate to people and the actual processes that I use, but the significant difference is that the purpose of our interaction is different. It is clearly not a therapeutic or supervisory process even if there are some spin offs in those areas and even if I'm necessarily sensitive to those same issues, but it is an information collection/research process. I really try to relate things that people are saying to me back to the broader picture of their lives or their practice and to keep in my mind the other elements that I need to focus on in order to get a fuller picture. That's a different agenda for me than if I were to be focusing on helping them to process their feelings and thoughts about issues being raised.

However, despite the value of this methodological approach, it was also a source of significant anxiety for me as a researcher. I often felt uncertain about what I was doing and the direction of the research. My most frequent response to my supervisor's

questions about why I said or did something in a particular way was usually that it was my intuition or 'gut' feeling that there was something worth pursuing.

16th August: Thinking about my methodological process and feeling concerned, at regular intervals, that so much of what I'm doing seems to be unplanned - it feels right but I'd really like to read someone else who is doing this sort of thing and feels confident to write about it.

4th November: One thought that is incredibly important to come out of my discussion with Mal [supervisor] again relates to how planned and pre-structured my methodological process is. It seems to come up again and again and I never seem to have a satisfactory response to it. Then I realised that I do what I do at the time because it feels right and because that's the way it unfolds - all of which is very unacceptable in academia because it is a valuing of intuition rather than mind. My intuition tells me to proceed in a certain way and I really value that. This process of sketching out the direction for methodology is an interplay between thought and intuition and a strong sense of feminist principles in research. And I think that is how most of us function anyway - a blend of both. Yet we often devalue the intuition in us when it comes to us being accountable, because it's not considered valid knowledge.

However, the issue was compounded by my internalisation of traditional expectations about the research role and process.

22nd March: I feel like I'm bringing with me a whole lot of (unrealised) assumptions about what constitutes 'good' research and that I should be doing something that is clearly distinguishable from the other encounters that I might have with people in my life. So I have questions like - Shouldn't I be more objective than I am being? Shouldn't I be trying to get more substantial content (not that I know what that would be)? Shouldn't I be more detached? Shouldn't I have a clearer idea of what I'm looking for in doing all of this? Surely it needs to be more significant than this if other people are going to recognise and see what I'm doing as valid. I feel like there is this hidden contamination from traditional research processes that I wasn't even aware of - I think this is a real source of my confusion.

The question of the validity of subjective research plagued me throughout much of the research and came to an unexpected climax as I commenced writing the thesis. My fears about exposing my work publicly (i.e. finishing the thesis) clearly related to my fear of judgement from my collegial community and the insecurities I brought with me from my earlier life experiences.

26th April: I talked with Mal (supervisor) about how I feel terrified to approach the task of writing. I know part of it is tied up in my general feelings of being undervalued in my job but I also think that a lot of it is about my general vulnerability that I feel in my life at the moment - or maybe that I'm just more in touch with these feelings at the moment. But there is also a professional vulnerability given that my job contract runs out at the end of the year. I think that this stirs up for me a whole lot of issues about taking the risk to put all of this stuff that I've protected inside me for so long, out there for public and peer

scrutiny. Mal made the point, and it's completely true, that this document is basically all of me - it's not some sort of abstract thing that is detached from me - it feels like it actually is me because I've put so much of myself into it and also my methodology has really required, and even demanded it. It brings up a lot of issues for me in terms of old stuff and about how I value myself and have been valued intellectually. I think there are a lot of issues for me about taking the risk to make this stuff public. I need to explore all of this more.

Cotterill and Letherby (1993) raise similar concerns in relation to undertaking subjective research:

Happy to talk about these issues with "specific" people, she will not always be able to pick her audience and feels apprehensive and embarrassed about the "world at large" seeing her wear her "heart on her sleeve". This is a problem that "traditional" researchers don't face because they are protected by anonymity. (p. 74)

These issues impacted on me to the point of feeling generally unconfident to complete the writing. Many of the issues in relation to the thesis were exacerbated by the competitiveness of the academic environment, the insecurity of my employment (the suggestion that my continuing employment depended on my thesis submission), and the judgements I had continually experienced by some of my colleagues in relation to the validity of my work.

9th April: I feel incredibly despondent about it all. I feel this terrible pressure to be working on it and to finish it, especially with my job contract ending, but there is something fundamental that seems to stop me from making any progress. And I think that fundamental thing is an incredible lack of confidence. I don't know what is going on for me at the moment, but I just feel incredibly average. I really feel unsure about my capacity to do a PhD and this seems to be becoming a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet, I know that people around me think I'm bright and could do this easily. I guess they think I'm just being slack by not having it finished by now, but I don't think that's the reason. I think I'm having real difficulties doing this and it's a very hard thing for me to admit. I feel scared that I may not be able to do it and what will that mean for me and my sense of myself, not to mention my career and job prospects. Yet on the other hand I know that I can do this. I get fleeting visions of myself working away really hard at all of this and it feels good. But they come rarely at the moment and most of my fleeting visions are of me doing no work at all. I feel like my energy for work generally is very low at the moment. I feel like I'm in a bit of a rut and I don't know how to get out of it. It's like I can see this picture of myself and how I imagine I would be at work if I could just let myself do what I wanted to unhindered by other pressures, but when it comes to the reality of all of this I feel like a slug.

It is important to note though, that the fear that subjective research will be judged harshly by colleagues, in my experience, is often based in reality. Many times I have felt a pressure within academia to justify the ways in which my research could be classified

as ‘valid’ and ‘legitimate’ academic research. The fact that validity and legitimacy continue to be defined according to positivist criteria seemed to go unmentioned. As a result though, I did not invite public scrutiny of my work and talked with very few colleagues about my progress. Interestingly, there was significant interest in a ‘work-in-progress’ seminar that I gave towards the end of my research process where it appeared that many people had attended out of curiosity about what I had actually been doing all this time. While the work that I presented was well received, I was again questioned by a senior colleague about whether my research really was ‘research’.

This was one of the issues that I raised with research participants at the completion of our time together – how did they experience their participation in this form of research as distinct from more traditional approaches? All participants stated that they had found the methodology to be a better way of gaining information than traditional research processes that they were aware of or had participated in previously.

For example, Jack commented that this process was more open than traditional research processes and also gave benefits to research participants in addition to collecting information from them. Miriam said that she valued this process because she believed that it gave research participants an involvement and some power in the process of the research through negotiating all aspects of it with them. Elizabeth stated that this was a better way of gaining insight rather than mere information and that a traditional method such as a questionnaire would not gain the same depth and scope of information.

Rose made the following comments.

Rose: I, to me this is really important research and this is the right way to research. I think that for too long research, like if it was quantitative then it was supposed to be good, and even if it wasn't it always came from a point that the researcher actually knew something and because of what they knew therefore they knew the questions to ask. And that's always been really problematic for me because the whole point of saying I need to research this is saying I don't know anything about it. So how you can then go to people with a set of structured questions and think that you are actually tapping into anything that's alive and vital about what they do, I think is a mistake. And maybe that's the point, maybe because youth work and any sort of direct work is a really shifting, changing thing because it's a personal interaction. However distanced you like to think you are there's always the interaction that changes you. So to answer a set of static questions this week might tell you something but to ask the same set of questions in 4 weeks time you might get a different set of answers because of other things around it. I think what you're doing gives you a chance to find out what's at the core of what you do.

Jenny: Which all other things emanate from?

Rose: Exactly. Yeah. So it touches like maybe closer to people's values and personal orientations and how that affects their work rather than like you know what degree do you have or what skills do you have, which doesn't really very much tell you anything about how people practice, I don't think.

Craig said that he felt it was a better way of gaining information.

Craig: ... because on a survey it's all set down and like if you suddenly think of something else that you might like to know or something that someone might like to tell you, well there's no opportunity for that, it's all... (pause) And plus there's no expression in it. Like the same thing said in two different ways could mean two different things.

It has been my experience that uncertainty and lack of confidence about the role of the researcher is one of the consequences of the adoption of an alternative and subjective research methodology. Certainly the role of the researcher is more clearly defined within traditional approaches. However, it is also the pervasive doubts about the validity of positivist research that impacted on me during my work with research participants, frequently without my immediate awareness. Nevertheless, I wish to advocate for a continual reworking of the role of researcher through both challenging the dominance of positivism and through opening up dialogue about the contextual and subjective elements of the researcher's role and experience of the research.

As I discuss in the following section, this lack of confidence and uncertainty had a direct bearing on my influence over the research encounter and the manner in which I understood and interpreted research participants' stories.

8.3.2 Researcher's Influence

Throughout the research process I became aware of my influence and control in the research encounter. While this awareness may have limited, to some degree, the ways in which I was at risk of unconsciously manipulating the research, there are a number of points to be made here.

The very act of staying present for long periods of time was challenging. At times the content was overwhelming both in its volume and depth. I found myself struggling to identify issues of relevance to the research while also paying attention to what was currently being said. Often sessions ran for several hours (at the request of participants) and this clearly impacted on my ability to remain focused.

6th April: One of the biggest issues for me is about how I keep myself present and my mind attentive to the actual content that is being generated. I find myself having to think about so many different things that I end up exhausted at the end and what's worse, so much of the time I end up not being able to listen effectively. I'm thinking about this long checklist of things that we need to get through and wondering if we need to say anymore about this one or can we begin talking about another and if so which is most appropriate to go on to. And I'm thinking about the issues that Miriam raised a couple of minutes ago as she was talking about something else that I want to come back to and when should I do that, etc. As well as trying to take in all that is being said and stay aware of the underlying messages in her content and her body language and voice inflections and my body language and on and on it goes. It's a really, really hard thing to do.

On a subtle level, I observed a change in my level of energy and attentiveness when the topic related to an issue of interest for me. In turn, I believe that this influenced the ways in which people participated in the research.

29th March: It's interesting because I really noted a change in my energy levels when we began talking about her own life and making connections there. I seem to have a much greater capacity to connect with people when there is an element of the personal in the discussion.

6th April: The other really big thing to come up for me today was the recognition of just how much I influence the process and how my ideas about what good youth work is affect the process. With Jack I could feel myself getting excited about some of the stuff he was talking about and I could sense him working really hard at it.

The transcripts clearly show that at times I have offered encouraging comments and leading questions when I have wanted to pursue a particular line of thought. Conversely, at other times I may have appeared less interested or focused and may even have offered responses which could be seen as 'inappropriate' to the research role. This was evidenced in those interactions where I felt less confident and wanted to impress participants with my knowledge (this issue is discussed in more detail later in this section).

My level of attentiveness also related to a broader issue about how I was feeling personally as I approached each interview. When feeling relaxed and positive in myself the interactions with research participants also seemed more relaxed. Wilkins (1993) talks about how the interviews she conducted differed dramatically depending on her moods and whether she felt secure or insecure:

I conducted interviews in both secure and insecure moods and the difference was striking. When I felt secure I felt nourished and did not feel personally

threatened by the hostilities or anxieties of others. Rather than manipulating, manoeuvring or extracting data and then withdrawing, I felt the wish to reach out and know people in their particularity, to join with and understand them and to share to the extent we were able. I was flexible, calm and open. I accepted more and sought to control less. (p. 96)

I also observed that the more stressed I felt, the more controlling I became in the interviews. My inclination was to attempt to control the process of the interviews, and even the content being generated. For example, difficult issues for me generally became difficult issues in the research.

26th June: Interviews are very much indicative of the things that I find easy (talking) and not the things I find hard (silences). I know that these things are challenges for me here.

The desire to control the research encounter related to my sense of confidence and was particularly evident in the early stages of the research. While I was attempting to allow the research encounter to proceed as ‘naturally’ as possible by trying to have very little control over the process and direction, my lack of confidence in the early stages of the research meant that I often felt a pressure to make comments that would impress research participants and convince them that I was knowledgeable. I would interject at what were often inappropriate moments simply because I had thought of an ‘impressive insight’. Inevitably I wondered how my own personal issues influenced the process and even in some ways altered the course of the discussion.

28th March: I wonder what would happen if I didn’t add a comment at a certain point. I wonder what the person would have gone on to say had I not made a certain comment. This reinforces to me what a huge influence I have over the whole process and the flow of the conversation. It also says to me how uncomfortable I feel with silence and that I’m reluctant to leave gaps for too long without introducing some other point or building on what they have already said. It’s interesting because what I observe in myself is some very self-conscious feeling when the other person stops talking and looks at me - I feel this expectation that I will say something important or significant, or even just a pressure to say anything at all. So I’m never really convinced that they have finished saying everything they wanted to because I become immersed in my need to impress with some clever thing.

28th March: It’s interesting because I often, in my life generally, feel like I have to get my opinion into the conversation. If I do have something that I could possibly say in response to someone else’s point, I become totally preoccupied with saying it, even though it may not be good communication process to do so. I know that all of this is tied up with my sense of myself and feeling that if I have something interesting to say I should say it and therefore impress the other person with it. This means that often times I am nowhere near as facilitative as I need to be because I’m too concerned about getting my point across and appearing clever. There are certainly big changes in this area for me lately and I

really noticed today that I was much more able to know what I would say if the occasion called for it but to easily let go of it too.

I became aware of the need to attend to my own self-care during these encounters with research participants, especially given the intensity that regularly characterised our meetings. Both young people and youth workers shared deeply personal information, much of which depicted tragic life experiences. I regularly felt emotionally exhausted at the end of our sessions (as did the participants), and at times felt triggered in my own life by their stories and emotions.

7th June: Really have to watch my energy and need to look after myself during all of this - it's very draining and personally can really bring up lots of feelings in me. A lot of the stuff that these young people are talking about is either not unlike my own stuff or at the very least the emotions that they are expressing are not unlike my own.

The other critical area of influence relates to the overall meaning that I have made of research participants' stories and our encounters. There is no doubt that at times my interpretation of what was occurring was different to theirs. While I am sensitive to this and to not manipulating their words and these stories in order to develop my argument, some degree of interpretation has been inevitable. I have attempted to deal with this difficult issue by declaring my interpretation and representing their different understandings when these are known to me.

At the completion of the research I remain uncertain about the extent of influence that I exerted over the research process. For example, to what degree did I manipulate the research so that people would say what it was that I wanted to hear (even if that manipulation was in very subtle ways such as being more interested and attentive as they spoke about some issues and less attentive during other conversations)? Did I attract people similar to me as participants in the research as a way of ensuring that my own ideas and theories would be validated? To what degree have I interpreted their stories through my own perspective and unfairly altered their meanings?

To some extent I believe that these issues did occur in the research. However, the critical issue may not be the degree of researcher influence but rather the possibilities for developing a conscious and reflective approach to research such that this influence is acknowledged and its impact on the research is asserted. In this research conscious reflection on my process has illuminated issues that may have otherwise remained

hidden. The process of reflection ensured that the research activity itself became a source and focus of the research. I too, became an active participant in the research through examining my own role and influence and the relevance of this for the central themes of the research. The implications of this conscious and reflective process in the research became most evident in my relationships with research participants and will be explored in more detail in the following section.

8.4 The Research Relationship

Consistent with subjective research methodologies in general, this research rejected the detached and objective relationships with research participants characteristic of positivist research in favour of an approach which sought to embrace the subjective and relational nature of the research encounter (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Rosenthal, 1993; Temple, 1994). This approach was particularly relevant given the purpose of the interaction with research participants was to elicit personal information.

Greed (1990) argues that researcher detachment common in traditional ‘objective’ research does not allow for relationships with research participants that are conducive to sharing personal and professional information. She states:

I see my research as a two-way process of interaction and sharing between myself and the other women. In particular, in trying to encompass both the professional and personal elements of their lives in my research, I need to be willing to give as well as take. If I expect women to tell me what their lives are really like at a personal level, they expect that in return I will share with them information about my personal life and feelings. If I pretend that I have authority to do research because I myself have superior understanding, and have no problems in my life, I would get nowhere because the empathy based on similar life experiences between researcher and researched would no longer exist. Therefore, I am not attempting to ‘control’ my ‘subjects’ by keeping off topics that might affect me personally and which might reduce my credibility in the eyes of my “subjects”. Rather, I am, albeit reluctantly, willing to take the risk of making myself vulnerable in the process of doing research; to getting hurt and admitting I have never been in control of my own life. (pp. 145-146)

Throughout the research the relationships that developed between researcher and research participants appeared significant for us both. I believe that research participants came to regard these relationships as safe and trustworthy. The dynamics of the interactions also produced a range of unspoken hopes, fears and expectations (will

Jenny like me, approve of me, think I'm interesting / boring / stupid / bad / smart / ridiculous; will this young person / youth worker think I am out of my depth / know what I'm talking about / intelligent / dumb / confusing / nice / bored / using them / nasty / helpful) which influenced the interaction.

Despite my attempts to seek feedback from research participants about their experience of the research, I believe that it is impossible to know with any certainty how these relationships were regarded by them or the implications of participating in the research for them. Therefore, this discussion about the research relationship is my interpretation of our shared relationship.

There are two points that I would like to make in this section regarding relationships in the research. Firstly, I argue that by attending to the nature and quality of the research relationship participants in this research felt more able to participate in the research and contribute a depth of information about their personal lives. Secondly, I suggest that researcher reflections are important in identifying dynamics that may affect the interpretation of the information collected. At times my relationships with research participants were challenging for me and it is in these instances that my reactions and judgements most clearly impacted on the analysis that I developed in the following sections (8.5.2 and 8.5.3). I will use my relationships with Elizabeth and Craig to illustrate this point.

8.4.1 Quality of Relationships

The research method in this thesis specifically focused on the development of quality relationships with the research participants. I believe that there are several aspects to this approach that were instrumental in facilitating the discussion of personal issues in research participants' lives.

1. I had several initial contacts with all research participants both for the purpose of discussing the research and to begin developing our relationships. For young people this was particularly important in setting the scene for our later and more formal sessions.
2. As we were beginning to get to know each other during these initial contacts I often shared aspects of my life with research participants and encouraged them to ask me any details that they were interested in. My rationale was that I would

soon be asking them intensely personal questions and I wanted to establish some semblance of mutuality in this process, recognising that our roles would always be different and in this sense not mutual.

3. I ensured that each session began and ended with general conversation where I expressed an interest in their lives in general and shared something of my own. These parts of our sessions became very important in the establishment of strong relationships as we checked in with each other about significant events occurring in our respective lives.
4. Relatedly, it was important in this research that I was attentive to the personal issues that might be current for participants. Involvement in the research did not remove them from the day-to-day activities of their lives and this necessarily influenced their participation in the research. While at times I suspect that the influence of their personal issues was not obvious to me, at other times the influence was clear. Some of the research participants were experiencing intense personal issues throughout their participation and these issues often became a focus for our sessions. For example during the course of the research one person was (very traumatically) dismissed from their employment; another had a parent who was critically ill; another was going through a major court case; and another was commencing the methadone program. We would regularly discuss these issues in our sessions. The value of incorporating the day-to-day realities of research participants is not only to be found in the rich content that is generated, but also in the integrity of a research process that acknowledges research participants in all their complexities, rather than merely 'extracting' their information. As Gorelic (1991) notes:

The production of science is not an operation (or indeed an autopsy); it is a relationship. That relationship is exploitative when a researcher studies people for the benefit of the researcher's career or of the sponsors of the research, without regard to any positive or negative effect on the people being studied. (p. 460)

5. I attempted to facilitate research participants' control over the process that they were involved in by encouraging them to participate at their level and pace. I made it clear at the beginning of my work with each person that they were not required to discuss issues that they did not feel comfortable with and that they were in control of all aspects of their participation.

6. My hope was that in addition to assisting my research the research participants would also gain something from their participation. I intentionally structured our sessions to maximise the chances of this by not only discussing issues of interest to the research but also encouraging discussion about issues that they wanted to raise and process. This was particularly the case with the youth workers who participated.

I believe that the culmination of these aspects of the research contributed to the level of sharing that occurred throughout our sessions. Clearly, other dynamics were undoubtedly at play and I am not suggesting that the presence of these aspects determines the level of participants' engagement. Rather, my suggestion is that these aspects of the research are facilitative of the sharing of personal information in a research context.

8.4.2 Elizabeth

My interaction with Elizabeth was challenging for me given the views she initially expressed in the research. I attempted to maintain a balance between facilitating her discussion of her practice while also wanting to challenge her ideas. After our first session I captured something of the challenges and frustrations that I was feeling throughout our discussion.

29th March: This is very different work to my work with Miriam and Jack. Very different. And much more challenging. I suspect that her and I will come up with very different analyses of her work and practice. And I keep on thinking to myself that it doesn't matter - I'm not trying to get people to agree with me and yet I also recognise that it does make it a lot more enjoyable and a lot easier for me if it does happen like that.

Lots of times I was really conscious of my own process and really aware that this is not about me disagreeing with her or putting my opinions on her and I was quite pleased about all of that. This is building on stuff I was writing about the other day. But normally I find it really, really difficult to let it go, so that when stuff comes up I want to be like a rat up a drain pipe and say no no no and keep on hammering the issue until they finally agree with me. I didn't do that today, I let stuff go and I really feel good about that and about the overall process.

At times my desire to challenge her was indicative of a need I felt for her to change the way she thought and practised. One of the challenges for me was to not be critical or judgemental of Elizabeth or label her as a person who should not be working with young people. At times I felt I was patronising and judgemental of her – the very things

I was critical of her doing to young people⁸. At other times I simply wished that she and I had finished this work so that I didn't have to deal with the emotions and judgements that her emotions and judgements brought up in me.

19th April: Anyway, lots of good stuff came out. I really feel like this is such a challenge for me, working with Elizabeth - I get so frustrated and really angry inside, I have to watch my reactions very much with her. This is really unlike my other interactions so far where most people are saying stuff that is really easy for me to hear and really consistent with my own ideas. It's very different with Elizabeth. I think what happens is that part of me that feels like there has been many times when I, as a child or young person, was told what to do and used to serve the needs or issues of adults, really reacts to her oftentimes very controlling ideas and attitudes and I feel like saying to her, you're being fucking controlling and you have no idea about these young people and you shouldn't be doing this sort of work. But even though that's how I sometimes feel, I know it's inappropriate. And of course, the reality of it is that she is taking huge risks and making massive changes in her own life and particularly in her practice because of the stuff we are doing. But I just need to acknowledge that sometimes this is really difficult for me.

As the other youth workers supported and confirmed many of my central ideas, Elizabeth challenged them and influenced me to change them. The learning from this interaction was significant for me both personally and professionally as it demonstrated to me my intolerance and my judgements about youth workers and youth work practice. The irony of me judging her for her judgements of young people was not lost on me. I attempted to minimise the impact that these judgements were having on the research by acknowledging these reactions as a result of my subjective experiences and views rather than some definable truth. I regularly debriefed with colleagues and supervisors after my sessions with Elizabeth and consistently reflected on the meaning of my responses to our interactions.

8.4.3 Craig

Throughout Craig's involvement in the research he maintained an attitude of resistance and negativity to my questions and in our relationship in general. However, a reading of the transcripts from our sessions would not indicate this, nor I think, would Craig necessarily agree with my perceptions. I perceived a profound inconsistency between what Craig said and what he appeared to feel, an issue that is addressed in detail in the following chapter.

⁸ This was most obvious to me as I recorded my reflections after our sessions I would often express my frustrations through judgements about her suitability as a youth worker.

Craig's resistance (or at least my perception of his resistance) appeared to relate back to his original decision to take part in the research. Given our previous relationship Craig may have participated out of a sense of obligation to me or because he wanted to resume more regular contact in our relationship⁹. Either way it appeared that his participation was uncomfortable for us both, despite having enjoyed a warm and friendly relationship in our initial meetings to discuss his participation in the research¹⁰.

At the end of our sessions I asked Craig about his experience of being involved in the research.

Craig: Well, the way I see it is like, you helped me out a long time ago, so fuck it, I'll help you out.

Jenny: Have there been any benefits in doing this for you?

Craig: Benefits?

Jenny: Mmm.

Craig: Ohh... No, not really.

Jenny: Nothing that you've learnt from the stuff that you've talked about or we've talked about?

Craig: No, because basically we've been through it all before. Lots and lots and lots of times!

Jenny: That's true. Have there been any costs?

Craig: No.

Jenny: That's OK.

Craig: I suppose the one benefit is that I get to see you again after all those years.

Jenny: Yes. Well I hope that we still do after all of this is finished.

Craig: Yeah, well you'll have to let me know how it all turns out.

In our second session we had a significant conversation about our previous relationship. Clearly there was a great deal of unfinished business for Craig from this time. This was an intense conversation for us both as we reminisced about many past situations where Craig was violent and aggressive to staff (including me) and other young people. Both of us acknowledged the impact of our actions on the other person and we both expressed our regret that we had not handled things differently during that time. By the end of the conversation we appeared to have reached a point of resolution about these issues and there was a sense of connection between us. This experience made me wonder whether Craig's involvement in the research had provided an opportunity for him to initiate this resolution.

⁹ Refer to Appendix H for background of research participants and our previous relationships.

¹⁰ Interestingly Craig and I had many more initial meetings than any other research participant (six face to face meetings and many telephone conversations).

Whatever Craig's motivation, I doubt that he would have joined the research if it had not been for our previous relationship. This is an important issue given that Craig's contribution provides a perspective that may not have been available from other participants joining the research.

However, this significant conversation did not significantly alter the difficulties that we were experiencing in our research relationship. There are many examples in the transcripts of Craig's lack of cooperation and interest in the research. Craig's deriding tone of voice conveyed his negativity more strongly than the words he spoke, illustrating the inadequacies of the transcripts as a reflection of our interaction.

Jenny: And what's she (sister) like? What sort of person is she?

Craig: She's a uni student.

Jenny: Is she?

Craig: Yeah. They're all pretty much the same.

Jenny: Uni students are all pretty much the same?

Craig: Yeah.

Jenny: Oh right, what are they like, do you reckon?

Craig: Oh well, you'd know!

Jenny: Yeah, but your picture might be different to my picture, hey? (pause)
Do you mean she's a bit snobby?

Craig: Yeah. Oh not snobby, just likes nice things. Well, really can't afford them.

Craig rarely agreed with me when I attempted to summarise what he had said or if I made a comment following on from a point he had made¹¹. One example of this was our interaction as Craig was telling me about fantasies that he would create in his mind as a way of coping with external things happening around him.

Jenny: Can you think of a typical one though?

Craig: Oh yeah. When we were driving, I used to have a bike along the, you know, I used to imagine being on a bike on the footpath...

Jenny: A motorbike?

Craig: No, just a push bike, yeah, and you know, the landscaped change, and jumps and shit like that.

Jenny: A free sort of feeling? Is that what it gave you, like you felt...

Craig: No, just to keep my mind occupied, basically, that's...

Jenny: And how did it make you feel? Like, that sort of image of you riding along on the bike and doing all these great jumps and stuff?

Craig: Yeah, well it wasn't sort of, you know, just so I didn't have to think about anything else, basically.

Jenny: To block everything else out?

¹¹ I acknowledge that my comments may simply have been inaccurate to Craig, however these interactions formed part of an overall pattern of communication between us, suggesting to me that other dynamics were also in place.

Craig: No, not to block it out, just nothing interesting was happening, I suppose, driving along. It was quite easy to slip into the void.

Eventually I decided to address these issues openly with Craig. My perception was that he was not comfortable participating in the research given his monosyllabic answers to my questions, his tendency to only talk negatively and in generalities, and his strong non-verbal communication. I wanted to provide Craig with an opportunity to discontinue his involvement in the research if my perceptions were correct. In the following quote I raise these issues with Craig and his response again suggests the difficulties he experiences in discussing his emotional response.

Jenny: When's your first memory of that happening, Craig? [*abuse from step-father*]

Craig: Oh, when I was about seven.

Jenny: Does that time particularly stand out in your mind? Like do you remember what that was about?

Craig: No, I don't really worry about it. It's not that big a deal. It's over with. Yeah.

Jenny: It would have continued... What?

Craig: I remember you always used to try and squeeze all this shit out of me at the [youth service], and I'll tell you, it didn't worry me that you wouldn't believe it.

Jenny: And here I am still doing it. Ten years later or something.

Craig: Yeah. Yeah.

Jenny: Do you feel like you don't want to talk about it?

Craig: Oh no, it's not that I don't want to talk about it, it's just that it's not really interesting and it's just... Yeah, and I don't remember a lot of it. I'd just rather not remember about it, it's just something I don't enjoy thinking about.

Jenny: Yeah. Fair enough.

Craig: Yeah, but it's no big hassle. We get on all right now. So it's water under the bridge.

Jenny: You don't feel angry to him now?

Craig: No. No, not anymore.

Jenny: You did, do you mean?

Craig: Yeah, I used to, a few years ago. But I didn't see the point in it. It wasn't getting me nowhere.

[... *our conversation continued on a different track about general things for a few minutes...*]

Jenny: So is there anything about, well I'll tell you what's running through my mind, since you reminded me about how I used to try and squeeze that stuff out of you years ago. What's running through my mind is that, like those sort of things that happened to you while you were still living at home, are of interest to me, but only of interest to me if you want to talk about them, so that like I want to make sure that this whole process is not one that's in any way negative or... So if it's better for you not to talk about it, then that's fine...

Craig: It's not that I don't want to talk about it, it's just hard to pin down specific things from that long ago. And I have trouble remembering, you know, a week ago.

Jenny: Yeah, and what I'm saying is that I don't want to, I mean I'm quite happy to encourage you like I've done with other people, but I don't want to push you into doing that if you don't particularly want to do it.

Craig: No, it's just... Yeah, I know what you mean, it's not a problem. It's just that I can't really pin down any one reason for why we didn't like each other and why we used to fight all the time. Just that's the way it was.

Jenny: So talking about, you were saying before that some of this stuff isn't, just isn't very pleasant to remember...

Craig: Oh yeah, but it's not unpleasant. It's not, I'm not going to break down or anything like that...

Jenny: Well, I mean it would be okay with me if you did. It'd worry me more if you felt like that this had opened up a whole lot of stuff that you didn't particularly want to deal with, you know.

Craig: No, it didn't. Dealt with it all long ago.

Jenny: So do you feel OK about continuing to talk about that sort of stuff then?

Craig: Yeah.

The communication pattern between us seemed indicative of power dynamics in our relationship. As our sessions progressed these issues became more dominant in our discussions. In our final session we had a conversation about repressed memory syndrome and sexual abuse.¹² Craig stated that there was no validity to the concept of repressed memory and if something as traumatic as sexual abuse had occurred in someone's life then they would most certainly remember it. After a period of time in general discussion, I attempted to encourage Craig to see a different perspective to this by sharing some of my own personal experiences. Our conversation went on for some time with both of us, I believe, becoming angry, defensive and offended. Subsequently when I re-read the transcript of this encounter, I could clearly see several times when Craig had attempted to stop the conversation by suggesting that we agree to disagree, but I continued with my insistence that he acknowledge (not agree with, though) my perspective. I experienced his superiority in the same way that I had experienced my brothers' arrogance and definitions of me as a child and young woman. I was taking our discussion very personally and as a result became defensive; the culmination of the difficulties in our recent contact.

The following quote details a later controversial conversation and was also indicative of the process of communication between us.

¹² This conversation began from Craig's comments that he felt his memory of many of his childhood experiences, particularly the abuse, was distorted. He had talked with his parents about this on the weekend and they had disputed his memory of many of the issues and experiences that he had been discussing with me.

Craig: Yeah, I think so. Well that's how I think AIDS came about basically...

Jenny: Oh yeah, how did it...

Craig: There was too many people, too many people in the world for the world to support, so and in any place where the balance is out of whack, like nature changes things to put it back into whack. You know, I think that's why that came along.

Jenny: So you think nature generated this virus in some way as a way of culling the population, that sort of thing?

Craig: Yeah, I think so. But I don't think it's a bad thing.

Jenny: What?

Craig: That people are dying of AIDS all over the world.

Jenny: Don't you?

Craig: I think it's quite a good thing, yeah. I think there is too many people. You know, like you get sick, like your heart gives out, they give you a fucking new one! I mean, that's not the way things should be. Like I reckon you have your time and that's the way. Oh, it's quite cruel and cold but like I think you have to be in this sort of situation.

Jenny: Do you think? What about the fact that it's a great proportion of people who are dying of AIDS come from one particular population? Is that unjust, or...?

Craig: (pause) For what...

Jenny: Well, I mean, gay men are one of the primary... A huge percent of people who die of HIV are gay men. Is that unjust or is it OK, or...?

Craig: Well, they know the game. They know what's going on. If you really want to, you can protect yourself against that.

Jenny: You can now, sure, yeah.

Craig: And yeah, if their lifestyle includes well that's what you'll get. I mean, like my occupational hazard was being locked away. You just have to fucking cop it sweet. If you want to live like that, you know what the risks are, and if it happens, well you can't cry about it.

Jenny: Are you implying that it's a choice about whether or not you live like that? You don't think that some people are born gay?

Craig: Well, that's a whole new kettle of fish, isn't it? No, I don't think people are born gay.

Jenny: You think it's a choice they make and they could choose to be heterosexual or choose to be...?

Craig: Oh, maybe it's not a choice. Maybe some shit happens that turns them that way. I don't really know about it, but I don't really have a lot of time for people that do that and then they get AIDS and then cry about it saying 'everybody hates us', and that's it, that's what happens to them. If you want to go sneaking around public toilets and do that sort of shit, and you catch something, well too bad. But there's other couples, you know, two blokes living together for years and years and years and they're both OK and nothing happens to them, well I've got no problem with them. It's just how you live.

Jenny: But you think that it's an OK thing that people, I'm not talking just about gay men, but you think it's an OK thing that people are dying of AIDS?

Craig: Yeah, I think it is.

Jenny: In the sense that we shouldn't try and stop it? I mean, millions of dollars have been put into researching to find a vaccine.

Craig: No, I don't think people should try and stop it.

Jenny: That's a hard line.

Craig: It is a hard line, but you know, it's either that or you're going to have people living till they're three hundred and fifty at one stage down the track. And what happens when there is just no more room? Like you've chopped down all the fucking trees to put up houses so people can live, you know.

Jenny: So does that apply to other medical sorts of things, Craig? Do you think we should stop doing research into extending our lives?

Craig: Yes. Transplants, all that sort of shit stops.

Jenny: All that sort of stuff should stop? Yeah? Even things like kids who are born with asthma and that sort of stuff, we should stop and if you die of asthma when you're poor then...?

Craig: No, it's not real good but it's just bad luck.

Jenny: So is that like a survival of the fittest sort of idea?

Craig: Yeah. Yeah, I think that's the way it started out and that's the way it should be like. The same way I think that people shouldn't have that sort of power over people. All people shouldn't have that sort of power over any living thing really.

The purpose of including these stories here is not to analyse their meaning as such, but rather to highlight the importance of the relationship between researcher and research participant and its relevance to the material discussed. Issues unrelated to the research were present for us both. Unlike my relationship with Elizabeth where I was able to restrict my reactions to my own personal reflections and debriefings, with Craig these reactions were embedded in many of our interactions. However, an awareness of these dynamics ensured that my interpretation of the information generated elevated rather than denied the role that I played in the generation of these issues. The interpretation of these sessions would undoubtedly have been different without these reflections on my role as researcher.

Attention to the relationships between researcher and research participants allowed for both a deeper level of information to be shared and a different set of interpretations to emerge than might be expected in a research approach which favours researcher detachment and objectivity.

8.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the research method in this thesis resulted in a process characterised by the flexibility to allow unforeseen, and typically hidden, issues to arise. This was achieved through not tightly specifying the research agenda and questions for each session, focusing on issues that emerged for research participants throughout their

involvement, and continual reflection on the role and influence of the researcher and research relationships.

By attending to the research process as a whole and not just the research content, the research methodology itself became a focus of inquiry and generated another set of findings. In the following two chapters I am suggesting that this approach to research lends itself to the uncovering and valuing of subjective insights from both researcher and research participants. It is subjective insights such as these that I will argue may hold subversive potential. Also, many of the issues raised throughout this chapter are relevant to the findings outlined in the following two chapters. I continue to place myself as an active participant in this research by exploring the relevance of my experience in the research for the central themes to emerge in my encounters with research participants.

CHAPTER NINE

CONSTRUCTING SUBJECTIVITIES

9.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the research in relation to the construction of subjectivity, particularly the influence of past experiences and dominant social discourses. While this research suggests that in their own right past experiences and social discourses are important in the construction of subjectivities, the ways in which they operate together is of particular significance. I will argue from this data that the meaning research participants have made from their past experiences is influenced by dominant social discourses.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the nature of the influence of past experiences for the research participants. The following section explores the significance of dominant social discourses and suggests that there is a reciprocal relationship between individual subjectivity and dominant discourses. This relationship was most evident in the issues of self-esteem/social competition, fear/intolerance of difference, and personal/social change. The final section of the chapter suggests that the discourse of emotions, particularly pain and vulnerability, may hold potential to subvert dominant social discourses.

9.2 Past Experiences

Claire: It was like they (parents) were making all these withdrawals without putting in any deposits! And wondering why they ended up in the red.

This research suggests that the meaning research participants have made from their previous experiences as children and young people is one of the ways in which they have developed their sense of self (subjectivity). In the first instance this was most apparent in the way that all youth workers (with the exception of Elizabeth) talked extensively about earlier experiences that had been formative in their decision to become youth workers.

More significantly though, there were many examples of the connection between past trauma during childhood and later behaviour and life choices. Jack captured the general sentiment of these discussions when he stated:

Jack: ... obviously if you get told for thirteen years you're no good, you might be starting to internalise some of that stuff and it comes out in everything you do.

The majority of research participants were consciously aware of the connection between past experiences and their present actions. Even Craig, who was reluctant to acknowledge any obvious connection, stated in relation to his stepfather's violence that, "that's when I became who I am." Research participants such as Claire, Shaun, Lisa and Jan were able to illustrate this relationship and provided numerous examples based on their reflections. For example, in the following extract, Shaun highlighted the way in which his view of himself is connected to beliefs he developed through his childhood.

Shaun: Because it's like I mean, at the moment I'm proving in their eyes that everything from the time I was eleven or twelve upwards, they were always saying I'm bad, and at the moment I'm proving it to them, in their eyes, do you know what I mean? Cause in some ways, my brothers what they did to me, I've taken it out on other people. I've done exactly the same things as what my brothers did to me on other people. And that makes me bad because, like, I didn't like what they did, so why do it to other people? That's what makes it bad, yeah.

Jenny: It also makes it understandable though, doesn't it?

Shaun: Yeah. But I mean I've put another person's life through shit just because I don't like it, do you know what I mean? (pause) I mean you, even at the (youth service) that time when I said I went berserk, that could have gotten really out of hand, and I put you through hell that night. That's one example, even though I wasn't bad enough, you know what I mean, I could have. And that's the sort of thing I'm talking about, what I've done with other people. And the closest people I've sort of stolen from or done some really bad things to. People that get close enough.

Jenny: Yeah, yeah. So that's a bit of a pattern for you, do you reckon, Shaun? Like when people get too close, you do something...?

Shaun: Oh, I want to hurt them before they hurt me. That's what I mean. (pause) I know that now, it's wrong but it's something that I've grown and I can't change it. I know it but I haven't been able to change it yet. (pause) Different people will hear this and say 'well he knows all this, why can't he change it' but it's just something I can't change. I've grown with it.

Shaun went on to talk about a recent experience, for which he was serving time in jail, where he assaulted a woman whom he was dating because she decided to leave after they had argued. Again the following excerpt reflects these connections in Shaun's life.

Shaun: When I was talking about the GBH (grievous bodily harm) before, I was at (a nightclub) one night, I'd met this girl and things like that and went out to a nightclub and we went home and I said something and we started arguing and,

that was the GBH, I slapped her and she hit the ground and broke her jaw and knocked a tooth out and things like that, and that's what I hated the most. I hate being hit and I hate hitting people, and that's what I did. I didn't have to do it, I was pissed, but I mean... ..

Jenny: Yeah. Do you think that there's still an awful lot of anger inside you, Shaun?

Shaun: Yeah. Yeah, there's heaps. Yeah. I think it was more with me as probably, being rejected was the biggest thing throughout my childhood and then probably that night I felt as though I was being rejected because she didn't want to stay and talk or whatever, that kind of thing, maybe because I was drunk, and then like I mean I just lost it.

Jenny: So she copped all the anger for not only this but all the other rejections you'd had in your life?

Shaun: Yeah. That's right, yeah. And if it had have been just her, well yeah, it would have been no sweat, you know what I mean. If you want to go, go.

Many research participants described a process whereby events in their early lives had resulted in meanings and beliefs about themselves that they then enacted later in their lives. My interpretation of this is that these beliefs became subjective truths which existed with, and competed against, other beliefs they had developed about themselves. The following extract is taken from a long discussion where Claire talked about the pervasive effect that abuse from family members had on her and how she felt she had to comply with these beliefs in order to cope.

Claire: ... having been raped or abused once, you are less able to protect yourself and your ability to assess people like, to judge whether someone is trustworthy or not, has been broken, especially if it's a family member that's abused you, because they... Even though it feels yuk and they, you're told by the abuser that it isn't, that it's love or whatever, and you have to trust a family member, your boundaries, your sense of self is all askew. You feel responsible for the abuser's behaviour and so, you know, your boundary of self, your physical, emotional, sexual, spiritual boundaries are all up the woop. You know, that's what happens when someone is abused, and because of that you're less able to see if someone is abusive or not, especially if you're used to it, if that's normal, if it's normal to be abused.

Jan talked about the ways in which her internalisation of others' beliefs about her (being told she was bad) determined choices she made as an adult.

Jan: Well, the reality is, see I reckon that childhood has a lot, a great deal to do with it, where your choices all break down because in my own life, I would never have went with a quiet, oh I could have... But I actually, my part in the violence and for which I take full responsibility, my father died quite suddenly when I was in (juvenile detention) and I was blamed for his death by my family and the institution and everything. So that, and all that information that I got 'it's your fault, you killed your father, you killed your father' they locked me in isolation and really reinforced that stuff. And I actually believed that until I was in prison this last time and I did this big speech about my life and how most women, young women, go through institutions and graduate to jail, because

that's all they know, have, you know, that's what life is. And it was like, I thought I'd actually dealt with Dad's stuff, but I hadn't. But with doing a lot of stuff, counselling stuff, I actually finally realised that the reason why I hooked up with violent men all the time was I was looking to be punished for killing my father. So whenever someone would hit, lay a hand on my children, that was it, I would just go right, that was the end of the relationship. I would stay there till they battered me to a pulp like yeah, and everything because I actually believed I had to be punished for killing my father. So it's all that other stuff.

It appeared as I listened to research participants tell these stories that prior to conscious recognition of the nature and history of these beliefs, a level of enmeshment¹ was present. Therefore, these subjective truths influenced behaviours and choices in subtle and pervasive ways but without conscious recognition or reflection. In talking about the effects of her history of childhood abuse Claire provided a pertinent example of the ways in which these issues were so deeply enmeshed in her belief system yet not open to her conscious control.

Claire: You know, it's not like you can point to a broken leg and say 'see, you know, that's what it's done to me'. You know, we're talking about emotions and psyche and the kind of stuff that you know, you can't see or touch, you know, and I think it's very hard for people to grasp that. ...

I mean, it's been devastating in every aspect of my life. Every aspect of my life has been devastated by this, spiritually, sexually, emotionally, mentally, physically, every way. I never felt safe in my body, it was very very hard for me, to trust people, to trust myself and to trust people, and what I would do is I would isolate and not trust anyone and that would become so unbearable that I'd end up throwing my trust at the first person who came along. I'd also re-enacted the rape situation again and again and again, trying to take power over it, you know, trying to make some sort of sense of it. It was like if I could re-enact it and this time, um, control it and take power over it then I could break the link, I could stop it from happening. But I couldn't do that. You know, I was a child and I was so wounded and I ended up being exploited by, you know, I mean, men of all different walks of life. I mean, I'm talking about bankers, barristers, lawyers, as well as construction workers and unemployed people, you know, even as young as fourteen. ...

And it hurts, you know, it really hurts. And it's set up, what that's done has set up a pattern in my life where I've tried to get the love, the attention, love and affection that I didn't get from my father, from other older, violent, emotionally unavailable, abusive men. You know, like both my partners have been like nearly twenty or more years older than I am, both my long-term partners, you know ...

¹ I use the term enmeshment in this research to describe the entangling of a range of dynamics, inter/intra-personal and social, that occur without conscious awareness and yet influence understandings and actions. Where the term is used more specifically, I refer to this meaning in the text. I acknowledge the use of this term in family therapy literature (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974, 1984) and while my use of the term differs, the principle of unclear boundaries within a defined system also relates, metaphorically, to the usage of the term in this research.

Jan talks about the pervasiveness of these beliefs and the ways in which they are internalised for herself and other people that she knows.

Jan: So you actually play out the role of a bad person and confirm that, because everyone believes it so you confirm it.

Jenny: To the point where you end up believing it too?

Jan: Oh yeah. Where you are totally bad, yeah. And there's like close friends of mine who are in prison and doing murder and they've actually done the murder and that's the data to prove that 'I am so bad'. Yeah. And just can't believe in themselves that they can, they are good people, you know.

It appears that the process of becoming more conscious of these subjective truths may provide enhanced possibilities for agency and the capacity to control their influence over present behaviour. However, the excerpt from Shaun cited above raises the point that possibilities for changing these beliefs are not simple nor is change a direct and necessary consequence of awareness. Claire also highlights the complexities of agency given her previous experiences; she suggests in the following extract that there is a strong connection between agency and self-esteem.

Claire: Yes, and I would have needed, well, yeah, I would have needed more self esteem and I would have needed more knowledge, and I would have needed ongoing support to make those decisions and follow them up, not just to make a decision and then not know how to carry through with it, which often happened with me. You know, like, I'd leave [partner], and he'd end up finding me. You know, I wouldn't know how to follow through on my decision to leave him, you know, I'd get away from him physically, geographically, but I wouldn't know how to follow that...

Jenny: How to follow that action through?

Claire: Yeah. Or I'd decide to not drink, you know, and I'd be OK maybe for a day or a week or even a couple of months, I wouldn't have a drink. But it was the following through that I had difficulty with, and it just reinforced my sense of failure, again and again and again.

It is suggested that when there is a level of consciousness about these beliefs a relationship with these subjective truths is more possible and that it is this relationship that may lead to a response that will diminish the negative impact of these beliefs. Jan discusses this issue in the following interaction.

Jenny: What do you think the risk for people is in believing that that stuff may not be, or entertaining the possibility that that may not be true, that they may not be bad?

Jan: Oh it doesn't change. It's like, it's really scary because I think you need a lot of people to be able to reinforce that and you need to believe in yourself, but I still reckon for as long as you live, or as long as I live anyway, that certain things will come up.

Jenny: So you don't get rid of it totally, you're saying?

Jan: No. Because I reckon you'd have an awareness of when it comes up, right. And that's actually what happens to me now. I have an awareness when it hits

me and I have to do like heaps of head talk, you know, ‘this isn’t right, I am good’ and keep, yeah, affirming it to myself all the time, over and over. So just different things can be said, yeah.

9.2.1 Subjective Truths

Thus far I have suggested that the meaning that research participants have made of their earlier experiences, particularly traumatic and abusive experiences, has influenced their subjectivity and subsequently, their actions and choices later in life. These beliefs became part of their subjectivity with specific truths attached. For example, Shaun and Jan were both told that they were bad and they then internalised these beliefs such that it became ‘true’ – ‘I am bad’. This subjective truth then appears to determine options in terms of actions and choices; for example, doing bad things to confirm this belief. Importantly, this appears to represent a deep level of enmeshment where these beliefs powerfully influence behaviour but without conscious recognition, as they remain unchallenged truths.

However, increased awareness about these subjective truths appears to hold potential for challenge and change. As illustrated above, awareness alone does not result in these beliefs being relinquished and replaced. The data seem to suggest that the effects that these subjective truths have on a person’s behaviour and choices may be diminished through conscious reflection. This is suggested in my interactions with Claire and Jan, both of whom talked about processing (reflecting on) the things that happened to them in childhood and through this, gaining a different understanding and level of awareness of the ways in which these experiences affected their present lives. This then allowed them to limit the ongoing influence of these experiences.

This also relates to my experiences as researcher where I found conscious reflection on my present actions and their relationship to previous experiences relevant in my encounters with research participants. For example, in my work with Elizabeth I was aware of my intolerance of her perspective on young people and could relate this to my experiences, as an adolescent, of adults who were defining and controlling and unable to listen and understand my perspective. The influence of my subjective truths was most evident in my relationship with Craig where much of his behaviour and the power dynamics in our relationship reminded me of abusive encounters I had with men as a child and young woman. However, unlike my interactions with Elizabeth, I only became aware of these connections on reflection.

These examples suggest the importance of a conscious and reflexive relationship with subjectivity. In the following section I explore the ways in which these subjective truths are mirrored in the dominant social discourses which encourage internalisation of these truths as a way of supporting the status quo.

9.3 Dominant Discourses

In this section I am concerned with the insights that emerged from the research, relating to the role that dominant social discourses play in encouraging the internalisation of a particular set of meanings and beliefs about traumatic childhood experiences, that then become a person's subjective truth. I argue that the research indicates that a reciprocal relationship between individual subjectivity and dominant discourses exists, reflecting a level of enmeshment. The use of the term enmeshment here refers to the entanglement of individual and social dynamics which are, in most instances, not consciously recognised.

Throughout these stories complex connections between individuals and society emerged. Research participants were able to readily make links between how people feel about themselves and dominant social discourses. There are many examples of this throughout these stories; for example, some research participants discussed the issue of power with reference to inequalities at a structural level and the ways that these are mirrored in individual relationships. Similarly the social processes of marginalising some groups in society were related to how those who marginalise feel about themselves and their life situations. In my experience as researcher the influence of dominant social discourses about the characteristics of 'good' research were pervasive. The degree to which I internalised traditional expectations about the nature of research was predominantly responsible for my lack of clarity and confidence about my role as a researcher and the validity of this (subjective) research.

However, the majority of discussions with research participants related to the following three themes – the relationship between individual self-esteem and social competition and hierarchies; fear and intolerance of difference; and personal and social change. Each theme will be explored in the following sections.

9.3.1 Self-esteem and Competition

This research suggests a reciprocal relationship between self-esteem and the hierarchical and competitive nature of society.

All research participants referred to feelings of inadequacy and not being ‘good enough’ either in relation to their own experiences or the experiences of others they knew or worked with. This relates to comments referred to above where research participants expressed their beliefs that they were ‘bad’ – Craig referred to himself as a “bad seed” or a “bad egg”; Jan said that these feelings continued throughout her life, “yeah, I am bad and feel no good, like I’m not good, and I know I’m not good because that’s the theme that’s been drummed into me”; Shaun was convinced that he was ‘bad’ and that he was perpetuating this belief through his actions.

Virtually all research participants referred at some point to feeling not good enough, either in relation to themselves or others that they knew. For example, Jan stated:

Jan: Yeah, yeah. That not good enough stuff. You hear that all the time with the kids, things like “I walk around with a black blanket all over me, that’s who I am’. ‘I am the darkness’. ‘I’m a piece of dirt that hides around this corner and won’t come out, and that’s all I am, I can see but if I move, well I’ve tried to move a couple of times but I’m not because I’m just a piece of dirt, like a little teeny piece of dirt that no one takes any notice of.’ ‘My body is just full of black shadow, that’s who I am’... ‘Black smoke’ that’s the word. ‘Like, that’s who I am, just this black, like air just going’... Just huge stuff. ‘I’m that small that I’m no good.’

Miriam argued that if people do not feel positively about themselves, this affects the nature or quality of decisions that they are able to make in their lives.

Miriam: If people don’t have that sense of worth and well-being that this ‘no, this isn’t good enough for me’ then they can’t make decisions about that sort of stuff... If one of the blocks in someone’s way is really believing that they’re, you know, their life’s a shit and that they themselves aren’t worth anything, then you’re really as a worker, I think got to, you’ve got to be on about tackling that before anyone can, you know.... So giving lots of messages, giving support so that people can perhaps take on a more positive self perception....

Jack talked about the messages that young people get from society about not being good enough.

Jack: We want to somehow de-code the endless drone because I think a lot of young people... I mean, it’s been described to me as that, speak about a drone, societal drones, that all this noise and all this thing that all says the same thing about worthlessness and about ‘you needing to change and you’re no good’ and after a while all that stuff, be it parents, be it police, be it Social Security, be it

Department of Family Services, be it whoever, after a while all that stuff just seems to merge as one big collective noise and doesn't mean anything. So a lot of the work that I do, or try to do, is to de-code some of that noise in a way that will allow that young person to understand what it means. And suddenly by understanding it, we might actually be able to be in a process where we could take hold of it and say 'well, hang on, I'm not going to let you push me like this, you know, I want some things too, you know, some very basic things, some basic things that I do, the respect that I feel that I deserve'.

Claire said that she continually received the message that she was not good enough because she was 'told' (non-verbally) that it was her job to make her mother happy. However, it did not seem to matter what she did, she could never achieve this, hence her feelings of inadequacy.

In less obvious ways, some research participants sought out positive affirmation as a way of bolstering their self-esteem. For example, Lisa frequently made self-congratulatory comments which I interpreted as attempts to feel more positive about herself, evidenced by her comments about how attractive she was, that she got her looks from her biological father who was thought to be a 'James Dean look-a-like'; that she was her mother's favourite child; and that she was often considered by others to be very intelligent, "he thinks that I'm the brightest one out of them. I mean I probably am." This form of 'boasting' extended to her leadership role with other young people, particularly when it came to stories of escaping police, sleeping on the streets, and glorifying her capacity to 'be tough'.

In addition to the recognition of the relevance of past experiences, research participants related the origins of these feelings to a more complex set of explanations. They saw the various structures of society as integral in perpetuating these feelings of inadequacy that people may bring with them from negative experiences in their childhoods. Many research participants related the issue of low self-esteem to the hierarchical nature of society or as Elizabeth stated, "society does perpetuate it, that feeling of wanting to be better than the one on the next rung." The following extract from Rose presents the general argument put forward by research participants.

Rose: I think because of the hierarchical structure, the most overriding thing that most people feel is the need to be better or bigger than somebody else. So rather than linking with people and having an understanding that if one of us rises, then we must all go up together otherwise it's all just repetition of the same sort of stuff, that people in fact do, if they seize an opportunity to go up two steps themselves even if it means stepping on someone else's head, most people will do that.

Jenny: So the competitive nature of it all?

Rose: Yeah. And all that stuff, just that the hierarchy has set up that competition and that to be... I think people just feel to be valued as people, the closer to the top you are the more likely that is to happen, and I think it's all really an illusion but I think the whole thing kind of runs on those premises.

9.3.2 Fear and Intolerance of Difference

Research participants described intolerance of difference as the primary characteristic of society. Participants spent considerable time reflecting on why it was that people seemed to be intolerant of those who are different from them and all concluded that the underlying basis of this intolerance of difference was fear, based on low self-esteem and feelings of not being 'good enough'.

In the following extract Elizabeth suggests that intolerance of difference is part of establishing an identity and relates to the fragility of identities in present society.

Elizabeth: Well, I think it's just... It helps us to define ourselves or to feel good about ourselves, if we can feel part of a group that we have things in common with. And I mean, this all comes in when you're talking about things like nationalism and so in Australia's history I guess, I mean... (pause) There's always been that sort of... What am I trying to say? A sense of community is based on, you know, people having things in common, and so if the majority of people are white and are, you know, good working moral sort of people, then they distrust anybody who doesn't fall within that category. Well, they have power because they are the majority... And therefore, I mean, this is a really terrible thing to be saying about human nature but it seems that the people who have the power tend to exclude anybody who's not...

Jenny: The same as them?

Elizabeth: Yeah. Not like them. Does that make sense? I think our identity or our self, what am I trying to say, self perception is very fragile and so we really need constant reassurance of who we are and what...

Jenny: That we're OK?

Elizabeth: Yeah, that we're OK...

Jenny: I'm OK because you're the same and you're OK?

Elizabeth: Exactly. Exactly. So we need that constant sort of evidence that... Yeah, because we're incredibly vulnerable to sort of question ourselves...

It is the concept of fear as the underlying basis for intolerance of difference that emerged most strongly in research participants' stories. Miriam considered intolerance of difference to be based on fear and insecurities where people only feel comfortable relating to those who are like them. Rose made the following comments about this issue.

Rose: Anything that's not the same, anything that, any one who isn't easily comprehensible to us automatically then has to be a threat, and once a person's a threat then you have to, I suppose, reduce them in symbolic size by

marginalising them. So they're a threat but who cares because they're just a bunch of so-and-sos or they're just not important or they don't have any idea... For a lot of people, the motivation now is fear, fear of things that are different, fear of being caught out, fear of not being good enough, fear of not knowing what to do, fear of like all sorts of things, and then because of the fear, yeah you get shut down responses rather than opening up responses.

Rose further extends this notion of fear to the experiences of early childhood by suggesting that underneath this fear is a greater anxiety about not having an unconditional experience of being valued.

Rose: (pause) This is just out of my head but I think what's underneath that fear is that we fear that... Well, I think it's fear underneath that, but I think what the basic fear is about is, about not being liked. It's about having that taken away from them.

Jenny: Not being valued, that sort of thing?

Rose: Yeah, valued yes, but in a much more real and like intense kind of way as well. It probably is about, it's something to do with intimacy, like that love that you get from your parents when you're very young, that sort of back to the stuff we were talking about.

Jenny: Unconditional...?

Rose: Unconditional sense of 'you're OK' and that's what I think is at the bottom of that. And whether we do that by making ourselves feel more OK by making somebody else feel shitty. I mean, that's one way to do it.

Jenny: A very common way.

Rose: Yes. Or by disregarding a lot of stuff and that's another really common one.

It was clear that all participants felt strongly that this negativity towards difference is based on people's fear and feeling threatened by others who are not like them, based on insecurities about their worth and value. Claire suggests in the following excerpt that intolerance of difference is also based on a limited view of truth in society that does not regard all perspectives as different but equally valid.

Claire: Like if you can only have one truth, then you can only have one, you know, one human, you can only have one type that's acceptable. You can only have right or wrong, good, bad. Whereas if you accept the fact that truth not THE truth, but truth, is made up of many different aspects and facets and that truth is the total of everyone's experience and everyone's perspective and everyone's reality, not just one person's or one gender's or one class's, then there's room for difference, and difference isn't threatening. You know, there's a place for it and it's accepted and when you can accept difference then you can also accept the similarities. But until you can accept difference, you don't want to accept the similarities because you're too busy trying to distance yourself.

All research participants related these individual expressions of intolerance of difference to dominant social processes and structures which act to exclude and marginalise those who are not seen as the 'norm'. Rose describes this social process.

Rose: There is a definite process within society which defines certain people as acceptable, but even more dangerously, as being the norm, and I think that definition is based on a white middle class male, we're talking present society. Then I think there are layers around that, so that like if you're a white middle class female, that's not too bad either. It's not really as good as being a male but... So there's a cluster of things around the centre that are normal and sort of valued, and around that centre is where all the resources are. ... and we need to hold all this power in the centre. The only way, I think, that people figure that they can do it is then to define more and more people as unacceptable, and of course the attractive thing is that those groups can change, so if you're making the rules up, today it can be Aboriginal people, tomorrow it can be those bloody radical feminists, you know, the day after it can be children.

9.3.3 Personal and Social Change

While participants talked about issues such as the importance of attitudinal change, realigning the unequal distribution of social power, and utilising collective strength as a change force, all argued that the key to social change was in encouraging people to believe in their own worth and to respect themselves. As Rose said:

Rose: ... but I think it would be a very different world if we had a world full of people who were unafraid. And unafraid, maybe what we're unafraid of at the bottom is that stuff we talked about earlier, that we're not good enough, we're not going to come up to scratch. But to think about a world where people were curious and open and were not afraid about things, just seems kind of exciting to me.

Jenny: Not afraid to take a risk, that sort of thing?

Rose: Yeah, yeah. And in that kind of structure then you can't imagine there being either a right or a wrong, that there would be whole lots more options open to people because we weren't holding ourselves back. And that's true, like the structure does it but we allow the structure to do that to us, even those of us who are really quite privileged in terms of, you know, like how strong we are or how undamaged we've been and all those sorts of things. Because it's easier. A world where easy wasn't considered to be wonderful would be good! But mostly that I think, like a world where people aren't afraid.

Research participants commented on a connection between personal and social change. In this extract Claire makes the point that the capacity for agency is influenced by self-esteem.

Claire: And there's also the thing of being so alienated from any positive sense of yourself as people, let alone as women, that, yeah... You need to have some hope to change, and if hope has been bashed and raped and legislated out of you, and preached out of you, then ... there is no hope. And obviously the state and the church has a massive investment in keeping things the way they are, no matter how unjust, oppressive, irrational that is.

9.3.4 Reciprocal Relationships

From the argument thus far, I am suggesting that the relationship between individuals and dominant social discourses is complex, reflecting both separation and enmeshment. I approached this research with the possibility that the separation between individuals and society may be a useful focus for the research. However, the research narratives have indicated that the ways in which self and society are enmeshed, often without conscious recognition, constitute a more pervasive force in constructing subjectivity. My original suggestion regarding the separation in this relationship may relate more to supporting this enmeshed relationship through keeping it hidden from conscious thought. Therefore, focus is placed on the ways in which individuals and society are separated, rather than the degree of enmeshment being suggested here.

In addition to the enmeshed nature of this relationship I am suggesting that the research has also indicated the reciprocal nature of the relationship between personal experiences and dominant discourses with an interdependency between both parts of the relationship. For example, low self-esteem and feelings of not being ‘good enough’ are encouraged by dominant social discourses of competition and hierarchy and in turn, people continue to compete in order to feel ‘better’ (more successful, more valued) about themselves, thereby reinforcing the discourse of competition. Similarly, people’s insecurities and fears are reinforced by social discourses of marginalisation and exclusion which are then instrumental in maintaining the importance of inclusion and belonging in people’s personal lives which then support the social discourses of marginalisation and exclusion. These feelings of personal inadequacy limit agency and may act to restrict options for political action and challenge to dominant social discourses. Similarly, researchers’ insecurities about non-traditional research processes reinforce the dominance of positivism which in turn acts to discourage research processes which might deviate from positivism’s criteria of validity.

Further, these dominant social discourses may also act to repress a conscious and reflective relationship with aspects of a person’s subjectivity, instead advancing subjectivities designed to reflect the dominant discourse. This may occur through promoting the more negative dimensions of personal subjectivities which result in reduced possibilities for personal agency and political action. In chapter eleven I will explore the possibility that disruption to these relationships may result in challenge to the dominant social discourses of Western society.

9.4 Subversive Subjectivities: Pain and Vulnerability

Throughout the research it became apparent to me that research participants' stories about past experiences and dominant social discourses contained an unspoken aspect relating to emotions, particularly feelings of pain and vulnerability.² I suggest that dominant social discourses promote a form of subjectivity dependent on a sense of disconnection in people's conscious relationship with their subjectivities, particularly with their pain and vulnerability. This subjectivity is reflected, at times, in the way in which research participants have told the story of their past experiences and the subjective truths that they have internalised.

One of the dominant themes in this chapter is the expression of low self-esteem that characterised research participants' stories. In addition, the contradictions that were often evident in people's stories related primarily to the inconsistencies evident between verbal and emotional responses. To further support this argument, research participants referred directly to their awareness that emotions were not encouraged personally or socially. Claire talked about her emotions and the lack of acknowledgement she felt.

Claire: You're talking about something that like, if it was a physical injury you'd see someone so severely dismembered and emoliated and disembowelled, that you know, you'd treat them with absolute kid gloves, but because it's emotional and you look OK physically, people, you know, have the same expectations that they do, you know... Yeah. But now I have... Yeah, and I was very, then when it became too much, I took the pain out on me by drinking, sticking needles in my arm, shaving my head, putting carpet tacks in my ears, you know, doing shit like that, you know. I'd feel pain, I'd go and headbutt a wall, you know. I'd feel pain, I'd go and get some anaesthetic in the form of drugs and alcohol to numb it, but I don't do that now and I've got more coping skills, and a lot more support.

Research participants were clear about the connection between their personal experience of the devaluing of emotions and the ways in which this was related to dominant social discourses. Jack captures this point as he talks about a lack of capacity to care for each other in society.

Jack: It's this sort of, it's how as adults we get caught up with this sense of... And society does it too, with this sense of really small, quite insignificant things, becoming really huge issues and being blown out of all proportion, and when the real issues, the real issues of where people are hurting and the real issues of where people are really falling apart, are hidden, because they're just too hard to deal with. And we base it all on all these artificial, like our sense of self, our

² These unspoken aspects became apparent in the research through attention to the non-verbal aspects of people's communication and also through some research participants' capacity to reflect back to a time when they were less conscious of the impact of emotions on their sense of self.

sense of worth is based, as I've said before, on all these material things that gauge our success. There's stuff about our happiness, there's stuff about our being able to communicate, there's stuff about our dealing with our families, being able to love and respect each other and all the rest of it.

Many of the research participants commented about their perception of the social devaluing of emotions as it had been expressed to them in their families. Jan said she had learnt in her family to cut off her feelings rather than be punished for expressing them, "Well yeah, just cut all my feelings off. And in my family too, is about 'you don't cry, you don't show any...' You've just got to look good, don't look bad and stuff." Similarly, Shaun said that his whole family was built around anger and yet he (and other children) were never allowed to express their anger and had to keep it inside them. Lisa talked about the ways in which she was punished for expressing emotions and told by her stepfather that it was a sign of weakness within her.

Jenny: It must have been hard not to cry when you were little and [step father] would hit you, was it? Did you cry?

Lisa: (pause) I think, I mean, I can't sort of say 'well he hit me fifty times this year and ninety times this year' but, I think after the first few and I'd cry and he'd hit me again, I'd just sort of control it, you know, and then I'd just go and sit in my room and jump on the bed and cry into the pillow, sort of thing.

Jenny: So you'd cry afterwards, when he wasn't around?

Lisa: Yeah. Yeah, but it just, and it was hard because you couldn't sort of show any emotion at our place, like you couldn't get angry or upset, you couldn't show that. I mean, if the pet dog died or something you couldn't just cry, you know...

Jenny: [Step father] wouldn't let you?

Lisa: Well, it's just, I don't know, I mean he sort of saw that sort of thing as being weak, and we thought 'no no, we're tough' so you just wouldn't do it. I mean, I know I wouldn't, I don't know so much about [sister 1] and [sister 2], but I mean even right until I left home, I never cried, you know, never did anything, you know, I would never get in a bad mood or anything. And it's just, I don't know, you just couldn't do that sort of thing with him, you know, I mean we never laughed or anything like that.

Jenny: So what do you think you did with all of those feelings, because I mean there was a lot of stuff happening to give you lots of hurt feelings and lots of angry feelings. What do you think you did with all of that?

Lisa: I just bottled it up.

Jenny: Is it still bottled up?

Lisa: (pause) I don't know.

It would appear that a person's (conscious) incorporation of pain and vulnerability may influence the conscious and reflective relationship a person has with their multiple subjective constructions. Further, the discourse of pain and vulnerability may determine the capacity for personal agency. These issues are explored in further depth in chapter eleven.

9.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that past experiences and dominant social discourses are significant in the construction of subjectivity. I have suggested that subjectivities are multiple and are constructed through the intersections of our past experiences and dominant social discourses. The central issue is the relationship that a person may develop with these often competing and contradictory subjectivities.

The primary argument developed in this chapter is that there is commonly an enmeshed relationship between past experiences and behaviours and choices, and also between personal experiences and social discourses. I have also argued that the exclusion of emotions and vulnerability in dominant social and personal discourses maintains a negative sense of self that facilitates the perpetuation of the dominant social discourse and may inhibit possibilities for agency and political action.

CHAPTER TEN

EMERGING SUBJECTIVITIES

10.1 Introduction

In this chapter I explore the central role that the concept of 'self' occupied in the research, particularly my perception of research participants' experience of subjectivity throughout the research.

At the beginning of this research I did not challenge the modernist notion of subjectivity and therefore took the existence of the humanist self for granted. I did not set out to research the experience of subjectivity as it is discussed in this chapter, but rather these findings emerged throughout the process of the research, particularly through my encounters with research participants. Areas that required greater exploration or clarification only became obvious with hindsight, therefore this chapter is based largely on my perceptions and interpretations of issues that may have been present for research participants, many of which may not necessarily be shared by them, given that I did not have the opportunity to meet and discuss these ideas with them. However, the appearance of these findings is indicative of the methodological approach adopted in this thesis, which has been outlined in chapter six. In recognition of the centrality of subjectivity for all aspects of the research, I have located myself throughout this chapter as an active participant in the research.

The chapter begins with an exploration of the centrality of the modernist self for participants¹ in the research. The following section argues, on the other hand, that in this research the primary issue was the nature of relationship with self², that is, the capacity for conscious reflection on subjectivities. I explore examples of both connection and disconnection in this relationship through consideration of both consistencies and inconsistencies/contradictions that appeared during the research. I then demonstrate the presence of multiple subjectivities for research participants and again highlight the importance of the conscious and reflective relationship between subjectivities. In the

¹ In this chapter the term 'participants' includes both research participants and researcher.

² The term 'relationship with self' is intentionally used in an effort to depict a person's active interaction with their multiple subjective constructions and to indicate a deeper level of engagement than a simple awareness.

final section I argue that the appearance of inconsistencies and contradictions which are normally hidden in traditional research processes may hold subversive potential.

10.2 Centrality of the Modern Self

The existence of ‘the self’ as understood in humanism was clear throughout the research data and appeared in a range of ways from discussions about youth work practice to the long term impacts of abuse on young people. While I did not clarify the meaning that we all attached to the term ‘self’, because this was not the original intention of the research, it appeared that it referred to the existence of an essential self who was the ‘real person’.

For Jack, Miriam and Rose there were regular references to the notion of self in a variety of different contexts. For example, Jack referred to a ‘strong and secure sense of self’ in our discussions about what constitutes a ‘good’ youth worker, and that young people needed a ‘positive sense of self’ in order to make positive decisions in their lives. Jack and I understood a great deal of young people’s behaviour as resulting from a negative ‘sense of self’.

Miriam talked about her ‘true self’, her process of becoming more consistent with this, and the importance of her work as an expression of this self. In a similar way, Rose talked about the importance of being ‘true’ to herself and being ‘whole’. Rose and I shared a belief that in some original form all human beings feel positively about themselves at one time but that negative and abusive experiences move people away from this feeling. Rose talked about an ‘essence’ in people that gets lost through feeling that they are ‘bad’. In a similar way to Claire, Rose referred to a sense of spirituality and a higher self that appeared to her to have been sacrificed and lost to the materialistic priorities of our society.

Rose: ... I think that we have given up possibly the most valuable thing we have which is our spirituality, and that means like all things like creativity and our higher impulses and our greater self all those sorts of things, and I think that we have given that up for material comfort. So I think that really what we’ve got are lots of people who are lost and some of those people are looking, but nearly everybody’s in pain because of that thing that’s lost, and I think whether you can name it or not, we’re acutely aware of it.

Shaun talked about the 'real Shaun' referring to aspects of himself that he could identify as significantly more positive than his common self-perception that he was 'bad'. When Shaun and I spoke about the 'real Shaun' he appeared to be promoting the possibility that he was not 'all bad' and that there may be parts of him that were worthwhile.

Claire talked about the damage done to her 'sense of self' throughout her experiences of sexual, emotional and physical abuse. She would often use the term 'spirit' to describe this core part of her that she feared was dead or had been irreparably wounded through her years of abuse. Claire and I talked about her changing sense of herself over the more recent years and the importance of reconnecting with this part of herself, again emphasising that this notion of her 'spirit' held the positive and worthwhile things about herself that, in her perception, had been damaged throughout her earlier life.

Despite the different terms that each of us used to describe the 'self', there was a strong sense of similarity and agreement that what was being discussed was a core and fundamental part of us. This core part was seen as holding a positive (and truer) view of each person, yet with early negative experiences more and more distance is created between the person and this positive sense of self.

At the time of participating in these discussions I was in agreement about the existence of this core self and hence the research encounters were a collaboration about the centrality of the modern self. Subsequent investigation, indicative of the transition in my thinking throughout this thesis, has led to consideration of the ways in which postmodernism contests the notion of the essential self.³ Given the emergence of these issues in this research, I do not offer substantial findings in regard to the question of the existence of an essential self, instead posing an alternative site for inquiry, that is, the relationship that people experience with their subjectivity.

10.3 Relationship with Self

Two aspects of relationship with self emerged for all participants in the research. At times I observed research participants (including myself) expressing a consistency in all levels of communication. By different levels of communication I am referring to verbal (those aspects of the discussion that have been captured in the written transcripts);

³ Refer to chapter five for more detail.

emotional (the feelings that were expressed in any form throughout the discussion); bodily (those aspects communicated through our bodies, in what has become traditionally known as ‘body language’); and energetic (that level of communication that passes between two people resulting in an intuitive sense on the part of one, or both, people).

I interpreted this consistency as indicative of a close and conscious connection with the person’s subjectivity. Conversely, I interpreted inconsistencies in communication, which led to the appearance of contradictions in people’s stories, as indicative of some level of disconnection with self. Interestingly, I was aware of interpreting consistent stories as more truthful and inconsistent ones as less truthful. All participants’ stories displayed both consistencies and inconsistencies. Consistencies and inconsistencies appeared in the research in relation to both what was described and the way it was expressed. In the following two sections I will provide illustrations of these from the transcripts.

10.3.1 Connections and Consistencies

Research participants such as Jack, Miriam and Rose all described a level of consistency across the different aspects of their lives. For example, principles and values that were important to them in their work were also important in their relationships and lives in general, creating less of a distance between work and personal life and a consistency between the principles and values that they espoused and the ways in which they lived their lives. This was a significant feature of their stories. Jack provides an example of this in the following extract.

Jack: ... it’s just about me as a person. Like a lot of the stuff that I, a lot of the stuff I do in my private life, the way I treat people, the way I see situations, is generally reflected in the work that I do anyway Jack at home who is Jack not at work, the same sort of general elements about, you know, stuff about a fair go, respecting other people’s dignity, respecting myself, tolerance and understanding that people are different, um, people do things in different ways, I try to bring through Ah I’m very much about um, well Jack’s Jack and Jack has his own ideas, and Jack, Jack may agree with people and may not. It is, I mean, it’s still a, you know, it’s nice to be liked by people but then again, you know, you can only be what you are and if people aren’t going to accept that, then they need to make a decision whether or not they want to have anything to do with you.

With some research participants I also observed a level of consistency in how their story was expressed throughout our interactions. In these instances there was a consistency

between the verbal, emotional, bodily and energetic communication that each person expressed. This consistency in expression was most evident to me in relation to emotions and vulnerability where I felt research participants were able to talk about their feelings and express them when speaking about painful issues. At these times there was very little indication of attempts to suppress their feelings or related emotional and physical responses. This was most apparent in my interactions with Claire, Rose, Jack, Shaun and Miriam.

10.3.2 Disconnections and Inconsistencies

Overall, it appeared that there were more disconnections and inconsistencies than consistencies in research participants' descriptions and expressions; in fact the consistencies referred to above became evident in distinction to these perceived inconsistencies. My interactions with Lisa, Jan and Craig provide the clearest examples of the presence of inconsistencies in research participants' stories and expression, although to some degree these inconsistencies were evident in all the research stories.

I attempted to be consistent in my interactions with research participants through being mindful of my role and influence during each interaction, and through continually reflecting on the encounter after each session. However, I am also aware of many examples of inconsistencies and disconnections in my participation in the research. I will include attention to these throughout the remainder of this chapter.

Inconsistencies emerged in Lisa's story in a number of different ways but primarily in relation to the issue of violence. Lisa had been exposed to a great deal of violence in her childhood both as a victim and as a witness to violence. While she was clear about the inappropriateness of the violence she experienced in her childhood and expressed strong views about the use of alternatives to violence, she also advocated violence as an appropriate response to others' behaviour. For example, Lisa could see the ways in which her stepbrothers (from her mother and stepfather's relationship) learnt their aggressive and abusive behaviour from their father and his severe violence towards them, yet she talked about the use of violence with them as an acceptable consequence to their behaviour towards her mother.

Lisa: She (mother) used to just like block a lot of it out, like they'd stand there and call her every name under the sun and she'd just read the paper and go 'oh yeah' and she wouldn't react to it. So I suppose part of it is her fault as well.

Jenny: What do you think she should have done?

Lisa: I think she should have got up and bashed them, myself. No way in the hell would ever I let my kids speak to me like that. I don't care how old they are. I mean, I'll bash them, I mean, I'll let go. I mean, if I see them do something cruel, I'll just go....

As distinct from our discussions of her childhood, in the story of her experiences of homelessness Lisa was dismissive of her experiences of violence and appeared concerned to project an image of herself as being tough and not at all afraid of violence.

I perceived many inconsistencies between the content in Jan's story and her expression of her story. For example, Jan was very critical of all welfare professionals, especially social workers and yet was herself studying social work; she expressed her belief that all adults cannot be trusted and that young people also feel this way, despite the fact that she was clearly an adult and was in a position of adult responsibility with young people; Jan complained at the lack of challenge provided to her by her colleagues and yet her attempts to ask me for challenging feedback were interpreted by me as confrontation.

However, while I present these insights here to support my assertion about the existence of contradictions and inconsistencies in research participants' stories, I also question the scepticism with which I have regarded much of Jan's story. From the beginning of Jan's involvement in the research there was an unspoken tension between us. I experienced this as a heightened sense of judgement and criticism of her story. After our first session I wrote the following notes.

26th April: I need to acknowledge that I don't think that I was in a very good spot when I saw Jan today and I wonder how much that influenced things. I felt like I was on a bit of a downer in terms of my confidence so was maybe being super sensitive to stuff and personalising stuff as well as being much more critical than I would be normally. I need to keep a careful watch on this and on the sort of messages that I am giving to people. I feel like I was really scrutinising her words to look for something wrong or some idea that it wasn't as good as she said it was. This is the sort of thing I do with myself when I'm feeling shitty and I really wonder if I started doing it with Jan.

I was giving contradictory messages to Jan. On the one hand I was 'saying' that I was open to her story and encouraging of her insights, and yet on the other hand I was 'feeling' judgemental and mistrustful of her story. The degree to which this influenced her participation and her decision to leave the research prior to its completion is not clear.

The inconsistencies and contradictions in the process that people used to tell their stories were obvious in the ways in which we all, to some degree, repressed our emotional expression and the painful aspects of our stories. However, this issue of inconsistency in expression was most evident to me in my interactions with Craig.

The central contradiction in my work with Craig was an inconsistency between his emotional, bodily, energetic and verbal expression. This was apparent to me from our first session when he appeared very uncomfortable physically - nervous movements in his face, lips quivering, often rapidly shaking his leg, chain-smoking, shuffling around in his seat, etc. and yet when asked how he was feeling about participating he assured me that he was fine and that my perceptions were inaccurate.

Craig rarely talked about, or expressed, how he felt. At times when he described situations of abuse that were clearly painful I asked him how he had felt and he replied by stating that it was fine or that it no longer mattered to him. This was particularly the case when he talked about his stepfather's violence. For example, the following excerpt illustrates what I perceived as his attempt to minimise his feelings about the abuse and its impact on him.

Jenny: And how did you cope with that? [physical abuse from stepfather]

Craig: Oh, I just copped it sweet.

Jenny: Hey?

Craig: Copped it sweet, there's not much else you could do.

Jenny: How did you feel though?

Craig: Oh, not real good! Pretty sore. (laughs)

Jenny: What about emotionally though?

Craig: Um, oh, revenge probably stuck out in my mind.

Jenny: So did it make you hate him even more, sort of thing?

Craig: I didn't hate him. I just didn't like him and wanted to get him for the shit he'd done to me. Like 'hate' is a pretty strong word. And hate's not like a place where you want him dead. I didn't want him dead. I just wanted to hurt him.

Jenny: And did you want him to stop hurting you?

Craig: Oh yeah! But I knew that wasn't going to happen.

Jenny: Did you? Even when you were little you knew that that wasn't going to happen?

Craig: Oh well, you know, you beat a dog, it's going to realise that, you know, it's going to happen. It's just the way it is. So, yeah, after a little while, you just learn to live with it and it's OK.

I found interactions such as these to be disconcerting. I was uncertain about what was occurring and how best to respond because these comments were at odds with the other aspects of Craig's communication that I observed. For example, during conversations

such as this Craig would shake his legs so strongly that the room vibrated, he would become pale and appear to be dry in the mouth, and he would avoid any eye contact.

I experienced these situations as contradictory and they led me to question the truthfulness, and potentially, the usefulness, of his verbal responses. In my reflections after our second session I wrote the following.

20th Dec: He has locked away so much of his feelings that when he talks, even about his painful memories, he talks from his head - but it's even more severe than that because a lot of us do that. It's that he talks from his head while at the same time actively suppressing his feelings - like he's ripping them up shred by shred as we talk. At times his lips quiver so much that I feel like the emotion is about to erupt or spill out of him. So strong that he can't control it. That's my feeling anyway - the message from him is so strong that I feel totally immobilised when it comes to commenting about it. He is too vulnerable and too dismissing of these vulnerable feelings for me to comment. It worries me because I don't know how to use this information - the info he has given me feels contaminated for all of those reasons, and yet I am saying that I have constructed this research process to avoid the role of expert or specialist who takes people's information and interprets it how I wish. And yet this is what I feel I need to do with Craig because it doesn't feel real or true from him.

A more detailed exploration of these issues in my relationship with Craig follows in Section 10.4.1.

10.4 Multiple Subjective Constructions

My interpretation of the appearance of consistencies/inconsistencies in the research is that they may indicate the existence of multiple subjective constructions. Relatedly, I am arguing that it is the relationship that exists between these multiple subjective constructions that affects people's experience of their subjectivity and therefore their behaviour and choices in their lives.

The following two examples of my work with Craig and Elizabeth provide more in-depth illustrations of the presence of multiple subjective constructions and their emergence in this research.

10.4.1 Craig⁴

Craig's participation in the research, and the relationship between us, suggests that different truths may be present for people at the same time, thereby providing one possible explanation for the lack of consistency in expression that I observed with many participants.

As previously discussed, Craig would regularly tell me verbally that he was fine and not upset or emotional when we were discussing his childhood abuse, while his other levels of communication were in contradiction to this. My interpretation of this was that different levels of truth coexisted, albeit in contradiction to each other. It was not that Craig's verbal communication was untrue or that his physical reaction was unrelated. I believe both were true and both reflected different truths within Craig at that time. It appeared that Craig found it difficult to allow himself to become vulnerable with me and to show me that he was consciously 'feeling' anything and yet his emotions were visible to me in this bodily expression.

At times in our relationship a similar process occurred for me when both Craig and I appeared unable to be consistent in our expression of the issues we were discussing. This dynamic culminated in our final session where power issues moved to the foreground of our relationship. I understood some of what transpired between us as a direct result of Craig's need to assert himself with me so that he no longer felt vulnerable. In this way I perceived Craig's behaviour as an attempt to use his power over me and therefore to experience himself as more powerful. It appeared to me that the dominant subjectivity in Craig was more consistent with a broader social subjectivity which does not value emotions and vulnerability and which discourages a conscious connection between past experiences and present behaviour.

On reflection though, I believe that there is evidence to suggest that my behaviour in these interactions with Craig also expressed these dynamics of power and denial of vulnerability. The following excerpts from my written reflections illustrate the different subject positions that were influencing me throughout these interactions with Craig.

1st Feb: We began (after lunch) having a reasonably serious argument about repressed memory syndrome. I was angry at him and his rigid male attitude. At times he talks to me like I'm a naive school kid – big issue for me. Anyway, he pissed me off with his arrogant attitude and I basically let him know in my voice

⁴ Refer to chapter eight, section 8.4.3 for a discussion of the dynamics of my relationship with Craig.

and my words that it wasn't OK to talk to me like that. It's hard because I get my roles confused. As a researcher I feel like it is expected that I will stand back some (a difficult thing for me to do at the best of times). But some of Craig's attitudes were so off that I found it really hard to engage with him at all - I simply can't put that stuff aside. It's too important to me, but even apart from that it is a part of me and I can't pretend that it isn't. Anyway, at the end my energy was waning and I was in many minds about my role and the appropriateness of my challenges and disagreements with him. I mean, if I say I'm setting up a process where I want people to honestly share their stories and their ideas, and then I avidly disagree with them - what am I actually saying to them. Am I only interested in really fleshing out those perspectives that are like mine, or at the most those perspectives where there appears some likelihood of flexibility so therefore some chance that they may see (and value) my perspective? I'm tired of this part and I find my enthusiasm for the other parts of my work that have gone really well, really wanes when I have sessions/days like this.

15th Feb: Craig and I clearly have a certain tension in our relationship. I know that part of it is because he needs to feel that he is more intelligent and wise than I am. I also believe that that comes from years and years of being told that he was stupid and dumb. But what I also know is that I come with an agenda too, which is that I am nowhere near as bright as any male could be, so his arrogance and off-handed remarks really push my buttons and together we create this tension. So when Craig doesn't agree with me about something is that because he doesn't or as a result of this tension and on-going underlying conflict between us? But the same is true for me - when I react to him it's obviously because of my stuff.

As for Craig, my participation in our relationship indicated the presence of multiple subjective constructions indicative of the inconsistencies in my communication. Each of us asserted our own 'truths' in an attempt to account for our early experiences of abuse.

10.4.2 Elizabeth

The presence of multiple subjective constructions emerged in a different way in my interactions with Elizabeth. Elizabeth's story illustrates the presence of two competing and contradictory subjectivities as she moves between her identities of 'authoritarian figure' and 'sympathetic person' in her youth work practice. At times in our interactions Elizabeth expressed her desire for control in her work with young people, a view supported in her workplace. At other times Elizabeth reflected on a desire for relationships of depth and compassion with young people. Both positions were 'true' and contradictory. While both positions co-existed throughout our interactions, Elizabeth shifted her perspective over time based on her reflections and her relationship with these subjective constructions.

Paralleling this shift that I observed in Elizabeth was a shift in my approach to my interactions with her. Initially I was very judgemental of her ‘authoritarian’ position and was aware of the contradictory position that this placed me in. In a similar way to my interactions with Jan I was both encouraging and judgemental of Elizabeth’s views and opinions. As Elizabeth began to identify her more ‘sympathetic’ position, I responded with less judgement and more encouragement.

The following extract presents Elizabeth’s ‘authoritarian’ self.

Elizabeth: Usually I come on pretty heavy and then they know right from the beginning where they stand with me and ...

Jenny: What do you mean ‘come on pretty heavy’?

Elizabeth: Well I usually come into the house and, well I might sit for a while but if something happens I’ll pick them up on it. Like, say I walk out and say ‘Hi guys, I’m Liz, what are you all doing today’ and whatever, and there’s two of them wrestling well I’ll say immediately ‘Well, you know, I’m sorry that’s not acceptable, you know, stop that or you leave’. And they’ll all sort of, you know, get that impression ‘OK, well this is not cool with her’ and I mean hopefully it’s consistent and all the workers would have the same response to the same types of behaviour. It’s not always like that but they will test and so normally it doesn’t take very long for somebody to try something that you have to, you know.

Jenny: So how do you feel about playing that role, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: Um, fine, yeah. I don’t have a lot of problem with being the big bad wolf and you have to be sometimes, OK, usually it goes over fairly well, they grumble but they know, they know the rules, they know that you’ve got the authority, they know that another worker will tell them exactly the same thing, so usually it’s OK. Sometimes, you know, they might feel it’s incredibly unjust and they might really kick up a fuss and they might say ‘but so and so told me I could yesterday’ and so you’ve got to really enforce that.

In addition to reflecting multiple subjective constructions, I also interpreted these contradictory statements according to their relationship with dominant social discourses. I interpreted Elizabeth’s ‘authoritarian’ statements as reflecting a more system-supporting perspective reflective of dominant social discourses about young people (i.e. they need to be controlled and can’t be trusted, etc.) and her later position to reflect a more system-challenging perspective. Elizabeth stated that the later position was more consistent with who she felt herself to be and her experiences of young people. I am suggesting that these two perspectives were both present for Elizabeth and that both were ‘true’ for her. However these positions appeared contradictory in our discussions.

The purpose of the following longer extract is to illustrate the tension for Elizabeth between these two positions and her attempts to resolve this.

Jenny: Do you think it's a hard job that you do?

Elizabeth: (laughs) Yeah, I do. I think it's really hard what I do. I think it's really hard to find some sort of balance between being a policewoman and being a confidante. I think it's really difficult to walk that line and that's what I've found lately that I'm not really getting anywhere because I've got to carry out the policies of the agency, because it's my job to ensure that certain rules are kept, I seem to be always... you just constantly feel like you're nagging and you're telling them what to do and you say 'don't do that, stop doing that'. And so there's nothing, there's nothing positive there in terms of forming good relationships or any sort of rapport.

Jenny: But that issue that you were talking about then about that fine line between being the policewoman, landlord type, parent type...

Elizabeth: Authority figure.

Jenny: Yeah, authority figure and being a confidante or counsellor or safe person or that sort of...?

Elizabeth: Sympathetic person, yeah. And I feel it myself, you know, when I'm in the midst of sort of chastising someone or warning them or whatever I think 'well, I'm not getting through, I'm not achieving what I feel I should be there for', do you know what I mean?

Jenny: Yeah, yeah. Is that a frustration?

Elizabeth: Yeah, it is. It's really frustrating that I can sort of step back and think 'well these kids must see me as really not approachable in that way', do you know what I mean?

Jenny: Yeah. Is that because you're needing to come that authority line?

Elizabeth: Yeah, and sometimes I can't help that. Sometimes it's just the way it's got to be because otherwise they would, you know, take over. Well, there's certain areas where you can't be flexible, where you can't sort of...

Jenny: Because of the organisation?

Elizabeth: Yeah. Yeah.

Jenny: Because of the rules of the organisation?

Elizabeth: Yeah, because of the rules of... Yeah. It's not that I don't agree with those rules. It's not that I don't feel that there has to be rules. I don't know, it's hard to explain. It's like, sometimes I just get the feeling that (pause) that to be someone in authority and to be someone who is approachable are really mutually exclusive to these kids. Like, the way they perceive it, is probably really different to the way we see it. We think that we can enforce the rules and make sure everything runs smoothly and, you know, get them to do chores and all that kind of thing. And also get them to confide in us and share things with us and help them, you know, in sort of some kind of emotional and supportive way. And sometimes that just doesn't, you know, it's just worlds apart, and you can see that they think that because they hold things back from you and you find things out and you say 'well why didn't you tell me about that, you know. We can't help you unless you're honest with us and open up with us' and you see the look on their face that it didn't even occur to them, you know, because you are that person up there telling them what to do and they've told all the rest of the house like, this is how often it comes out. You know, they'll confide in each other and the group is usually really closed and really loyal and really, you know how they form friendships really quickly.

Jenny: Sure, very strong, yeah.

Elizabeth: And often that is something that excludes the worker, you know, the worker is out there and that's when you stop and think, and you think, well, there's something wrong with that pattern that it doesn't even occur to kids to

come to us, and you know, I've really been noticing that and I'm not sure how you get around that.

The presence of Elizabeth's view of herself as a 'sympathetic' worker increased over the course of our interactions. Within this view Elizabeth reflected on the deeper emotional issues both for her and for young people. Elizabeth identified this as a progression to a closer relationship with herself as she included and valued the more emotional and vulnerable aspects of her own life and the lives of young people. Elizabeth identified the research process as significant in her reflections on these issues. She stated that her identity as an authority figure was not one that she would consciously choose but arose out of her integration into her workplace. Reflection on these issues through the research encouraged greater consciousness and therefore greater control over how she understands and responds to these issues, as illustrated in the following excerpt.

Elizabeth: Yeah, and I mean I suppose subconsciously I've gone along with things that I've never really liked. See I've never articulated this much before. I'd never really gone through the process of seeing it like this and that's why it's so valuable to talk about it. But I think when I look back now, that my clashes with (co-worker) have become less sort of frequent and less problematic because I have chosen to go along with stuff. I have thought to myself 'well, this is the way (the youth service) does things, I'm not used to it but I can see that we need structure'. And certainly it makes it easier for workers to have lots of structure, you know, in a sense...

Jenny: So you sacrificed your, maybe some of your principles and beliefs about...?

Elizabeth: Yeah, without being even conscious of it, I think, I have started to be more hard line and yeah, just not questioned as much as I used to. I guess that's partly because I've sort of got used to (co-worker) and I know where he comes from.

My observation was that Elizabeth moved from a position of disconnection to a position of connection in her relationship with self, over the course of the research. The important role of reflection in this conscious relationship with subjectivity is illustrated in Elizabeth's story.

10.5 Subversive Subjectivities: Inconsistencies and Contradictions

In this section I argue that the presence of inconsistencies and contradictions may hold possibilities for subverting dominant discourses. These insights emerged through a research process which paid attention to the researcher's subjective experiences of the

research encounters. Without attention to this dimension it is possible that these inconsistencies and contradictions would not have become apparent.

The subversive discourses in this research were unspoken. In the previous chapter I referred to the unspoken discourse of pain and vulnerability and its subversive potential. In this chapter I have argued that the appearance of (unspoken) inconsistencies and contradictions may also lead to subversive discourses.

A modernist view of subjectivity may interpret these findings by suggesting that the inconsistencies and contradictions apparent in the research indicate that the person is not being 'true to themselves'. However, my interactions with research participants clearly demonstrated that there are many layers of truth and different subjectivities.

Thus far I have suggested that inconsistencies and contradictions in research participants' stories indicate that subjectivity is multiple and contradictory. Research participants demonstrated that there are many different subjective constructions that they move in and out of and also that different and contradictory subjectivities co-exist simultaneously. My observations suggest that the relationship between these multiple subjective constructions influence the way in which research participants experience their subjectivities and their agency.

Disconnection in the relationship with subjectivities appeared to result in dominant subjective constructions mirroring dominant social discourses. Through conscious reflection on the relationships between multiple subjective constructions, and therefore a more connected relationship with subjectivities, some research participants appeared to acquire a greater capacity for agency, particularly a form of agency which challenges dominant social discourses. It is this capacity for conscious reflection which may lead to subversive subjectivities. This argument is further developed in the following chapter.

10.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the findings from the research in relation to my interpretation of research participants' experiences of subjectivity. While the modernist view of self was most apparent in research participants' verbal accounts, my observations about the other levels of communication apparent in the research

encounters suggested that a more complex subjectivity was being presented. Consideration of these unspoken dimensions to our communication revealed differing levels of connection and disconnection in the relationships that people appeared to have with their subjectivity. Subjectivities appeared to be multiple and contradictory and agency and political action may be enhanced through a conscious and reflective relationship with self.

In the following chapter I will present the concluding arguments in this research.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

RECONCEPTUALISING SUBJECTIVITIES

11.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the concluding arguments of this thesis. By revisiting the major themes of this research, I will explore the progression of ideas over the course of the thesis and examine the potential for extending the research findings with reference to the postmodern feminist literature.

Given the reconceptualisation in the nature of theorising that has been central to this research¹ the conclusions presented here do not attempt to be generalisable. However, this research exists as part of a broader concern with issues of subjectivity, truth, knowledge, agency and change, particularly within postmodern feminism. In this final chapter, therefore, I am attempting to explore the capacity of the specific to inform the general by presenting my concluding arguments from my encounters with research participants and developing and extending them with reference to postmodern feminist theories. In this sense Rothfield (1991) also argues, “it is obviously important to be able to theorise beyond the absolutely specific instance. The abstraction inherent in such moments allows for the development of insight, explanation, understanding and speculation” (p. 54).

Firstly, I return to one of the central themes of this research, the transitory context of theorising which resulted in the reconceptualisation of the research. I present my conclusions in relation to the possibilities and limitations of theorising and the role of subjectivity in knowledge generation. Following on from this I present my concluding arguments in relation to the other consistent theme in this research – multiple subjective constructions. Included here are the influences on the construction of subjectivity and the nature of the relationship people construct with these multiple subjectivities².

Following on from these two sections, the remainder of this chapter explores some of the most significant findings from this thesis, building on the notion introduced in

¹ Refer to chapter one, section 1.3 and chapter seven, section 7.6.2 for more detail.

² As previously noted, I am using the general term ‘relationship with self’ to depict a person’s active interaction with their multiple subjective constructions and to indicate a deeper level of engagement than a simple awareness.

chapter eight, that the research methodology opened up possibilities for previously hidden insights into the nature of subjectivity to emerge, and my suggestion that these insights may be subversive in their potential to challenge dominant discourses in society. Firstly, I explore the appearance of inconsistencies and contradictions in the research; secondly, I explore the discourse of pain and vulnerability and the importance of this for agency and social change; and thirdly, I focus on the issues of agency by revisiting the discussion about the constituting / constituted nature of subjectivity introduced in chapter five, and present my conclusions about the possibilities for agency in the postmodern decentered subject. I conclude this chapter with a summary of the overall thesis and indications for future research.

11.2 Theorising, Subjectivity and Research

This thesis is located in the postmodern challenge to Enlightenment thought, particularly the notion of an objective and knowable world and the belief in a stable and unified subject (Flax, 1990a; Madison, 1988; Seidman, 1994). I have presented both of these arguments in this thesis and they have formed the central aspects of the postmodern feminist critique of modernism developed here³. These issues are central to this research specifically in relation to the rejection of metanarratives and the implications of this for the possibilities of retaining agency in the decentered subject of postmodernism.

The recognition that it is no longer possible, nor desirable, to attempt to theorise with certainty beyond the specific, has resulted in an inevitable emphasis on the nature of theorising and the contextual implications of research findings. The complexities in generating knowledge during transitional times are acknowledged widely (Crowley & Himmelweit, 1992; Flax, 1990a, 1990b, 1993a, 1993b; Graham et al., 1992; Hekman, 1990; Lovibond, 1989; Marshall, 1994; Nicholson, 1990; Zalewski, 2000) and they have been evident throughout my thesis. The appearance of these challenges in my work is clearly not accidental but rather is a feature of the time in which I have been writing and the ways in which these issues, previously theoretical, have become a part of the actual practice experience of this thesis.

³ Refer to chapter three for a discussion of postmodern/postmodern feminist positions on metanarratives; refer to chapter five for a discussion of postmodern/postmodern feminist positions on subjectivity.

Thus far in the thesis I have focused on two primary issues in the nature of theorising: the possibilities and limitations for theorising without universalising, and the incorporation of subjectivity in the research methodology as a way of generating system challenging knowledge. Both of these issues have emerged as a result of the reconceptualisation in the research where my modernist approaches to theorising were challenged and substituted for primarily postmodern approaches. However it is also significant to note that elements of modernism now coexist with illuminations from postmodernism, and particularly, postmodern feminism. Graham et al. (1992) note a similar sentiment:

Meanings are not only altered as part of the switch to postmodernism but in the process adopt an apparent fluidity which taxes clear thinking. The literature is full of conundrums with plenty of scope for sorting out or tidying up. Thus if, in what follows, the editors' lingering modernist preconceptions come to the surface, this is peculiarly appropriate, for it will only reflect the current state of affairs in the social sciences at large. To completely discard the language and preconceptions of modernism, should it be deemed desirable or unavoidable, is likely to be a painful business. (p. 2)

As Flax (1990a) points out, many philosophers have an ambivalent relationship to the Enlightenment and “it is a legacy that many of us can neither fully accept nor reject, neither destroy nor preserve” (p. 9). I am not attempting here to construct a compromise or a synthesis between modernism and postmodernism, but rather I am seeking a next step (my next step) in the broader transitional process.

There are several points I wish to make about the position that has developed in relation to theorising in this thesis, specifically in relation to universalising and subjectivity.

The most evident concern in the reconceptualisation of my approach to theorising has been how I can say ‘something’ of significance without attempting to say ‘everything’.

Flax (1990a) expresses this issue in the following way:

How is it possible to write? What meanings can writing have when every proposition and theory seems questionable, one's own identity is uncertain, and the status of the intellectual is conceived alternately as hopelessly enmeshed in oppressive knowledge/power relations or utterly irrelevant to the workings of the technical-rational bureaucratic state? (p. 5)

This tension between universalising and relativist approaches to theorising has consistently appeared in my research and the ways in which I, as researcher, may speak for others has been a central dilemma. Universalising approaches to theorising

legitimate the notion of speaking for others and disregard the centrality of the context and location from which one speaks and researches. This has been a central critique of modernist approaches to theorising and was significant in my search for alternative approaches to research.

For feminists there has been significant interest in these issues given the history of male attempts to define women, and more recently, attempts by some women to use their specific experiences as definitions relevant to all women. This position has been a central critique from much of feminism “which holds that speaking for others is arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate” (Alcoff, 1991, p. 60).

Alcoff (1991) argues that “where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus that one cannot assume an ability to transcend one’s location” (p. 6-7). This relates to the limitations of representation and “it is precisely because of the mediated character of all representations that some persons have rejected on political as well as epistemic grounds the legitimacy of speaking for others (Alcoff, p. 9).

As a result of these concerns many feminists turned to methodologies that were respectful of the specific location of the people being researched. Feminists’ interest in standpoint theory was borne out of this concern. Standpoint theory has made significant progress in the recognition that the location from which one speaks affects the discourses available to the speaker. However, by prioritising some locations over others and searching for a ‘truer truth’, standpoint theory remains modernist in its orientation and therefore limited in its capacity to address this tension between universalism and relativism.

My original intention in this research was to employ standpoint epistemology as the primary methodology. However, it was inadequate to assist in fully understanding the data I collected. In fact it appeared to me that modernist understandings alone would have denied the complexities of my research findings, suppressing their differences and diminishing their potential to disrupt dominant discourses.

Alternatively, and consistent with postmodern feminist approaches, I attempted to incorporate attention to the specificity of the research. This involved respecting the specific, located and contextual nature of the research process while drawing out issues

of relevance for social theory and political action. In a practical sense, this research stressed the importance of researcher and research participant subjectivities and the flexible nature of the research process as central aspects of a methodology that aims to capture the specific and located nature of the research process.

My use of the feminist personal narratives approach facilitated research participants' subjective involvement in the research. The research methodology was also strongly influenced by the acknowledgement of the researcher's subjectivity and, therefore, influence in the research process. This approach was influenced by Stanley's (1992, 1993a, 1993b) concept of researcher auto/biography and the value of locating ourselves as researchers, both personally and methodologically, through the use of ongoing reflections. This approach to research stands in distinction to the dominance of pure reason and logic, and subsequent rejection of subjectivity, that has characterised positivism (Nielsen, 1990).

In my experience of this research, the insights gained from continual reflections on my role and influence allowed me to see the specificity of what was occurring in the research encounters and to locate my work in a broader context. Of course, the central issue about the appearance of subjectivity in the research was that it opened up the possibility for questioning the nature of truth, and issues surrounding theorising. It became obvious to me that there was, indeed, no one truth in relation to the issues of concern to this thesis. The consequential next step was to admit, albeit reluctantly, that no universal truths meant no universal theorising.

I have become aware of the limitations of theorising and the impossibilities of making grand claims or developing metanarratives. I am suspicious about the capacity of theory to produce the results that modernism has argued for and, like Flax (1990a), I do not believe that there can be "a perfectly adequate, unified theory of the 'whole'" (p. 5). Consistent with postmodern feminism more generally, this thesis has clearly demonstrated that truth and knowledge generation are situational and contextual and that research processes are necessarily limited because of this (Burgos, 1989; Gunew, 1990; Grosz, 1988; Harding, 1986, 1987; Hekman, 1987; Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994; Hubbard, 1990; Nielsen, 1990; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Riessman, 1993).

However, this research has also highlighted the possibilities in theorising that may be opened up through recognising the contextual nature of theorising and truth. Limitations can be reframed as opportunities to explore issues that would otherwise be considered unimportant or irrelevant to the original research purpose. This view is shared by Flax (1990b) who suggests that this “transition state makes certain forms of thought possible and necessary, and it excludes others” (p. 39). This claim is particularly evident in relation to the issue of subjectivity and the ways in which more contextualised research methodologies may provide insights previously not noticed or acknowledged. bell hooks (1990b) notes this and argues that challenging universalising opens up new possibilities for construction of self and for agency.

Attention to the ways in which agency and social change might be facilitated has been a central concern of this thesis. Therefore, a commitment to how useful knowledge can be generated so as to contribute to the construction of a society (including intra- and inter-personal relationships) that is not characterised by domination and repression, both socially and personally, has been a primary aim of the research. Flax (1993a) states a similar position:

What follows from the claim that subjectivity is not unitary, fixed, homogenous, or teleological? It does *not* follow that subjectivity is an empty or outmoded category that we can happily discard along with other modern hangups. To make such a claim would be to privilege one view of subjectivity; if it is not that, it is nothing. It also does not follow that we can make no claims about what we believe to be better or worse ways of being a person. We cannot fall back on reassuring, universal standards to justify our beliefs. However, we can, do, and must make judgements about how to be with and treat ourselves and others (since one aspect of subjectivity is intersubjectivity). (p. 101)

As I shall suggest later in this chapter, attention to subjectivity in research may generate knowledge useful to social change through the use of conscious reflection. In this sense, useful knowledge then, may well be what was previously considered inappropriate or irrelevant in that it is potentially generated through a reconceptualisation of theorising and subjectivity.

11.3 Multiple Subjective Constructions

The research findings support the claim, consistent with postmodern feminism, that subjectivity is constructed. The Enlightenment notion of “the existence of something called a ‘self’, a stable, reliable, integrative entity that has access to our inner states and

outer reality, at least to a limited (but knowable) degree” (Flax, 1990a, p. 8) appears to no longer be sustainable. Francis (2002) says that it is “evident that we are not fixed selves, born with our complete personalities in tact, and remaining the same in all social situations” (p. 48).

Importantly in this thesis the development of subjectivity appears to be a process of constructions, influenced by dominant social discourses and meanings made from past experiences⁴ that are then internalised and compete for dominance. These subjective constructions are then expressed as ‘truths’. Hekman (1999) supports this notion, arguing, “that identities are constructed from the mix of elements available in a given society is the only explanation for vast cultural variations in identity” (p. 18).

The research findings also support the view within postmodernism that subjectivity is not unitary but multiple and that these multiple subjective constructions influence people’s behaviour and choices. De Lauretis (1986) expresses this view of the multiple subject:

What is emerging in feminist writings is ... the concept of a multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with, language; an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class, and often indeed across languages and cultures; an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists on as a strategy. (p. 9)

While this thesis argues that subjectivity in Western society is characterised by these multiple subjective constructions, it is also important to acknowledge that this sense of fragmentation does not necessitate a dismissal of all elements of subjective coherence. In fact many postmodern feminists attempt to combine this fragmentation with a sense of coherence. Flax (1993a) notes that fragmentation is not the only alternative to a unitary self and argues that “people can achieve coherence or long-term stability without claiming or constructing a (false or true) solid core self. Lacking an ability to sustain coherence, one slides into the endless terror, emptiness, desolate loneliness, and fear of annihilation that pervade borderline subjectivity” (p. 103). Bordo (1992) acknowledges that Flax rejects essentialist ideas and yet is also “suspicious of any fragmentation which would undermine the authority of our experience just at that

⁴ It is acknowledged that there is a range of influences on the construction of subjectivity and that dominant social discourses and past experiences are not the only influencing forces.

cultural moment when we might begin to ‘remember ourselves’ and ‘to make ourselves subject’” (p. 163).

Relatedly, both Hekman (1999) and Francis (2002) advance the argument that there is a difference between the epistemological analysis of identity and the experience of identity in everyday life. Hekman argues that people do not experience their identity as multiply constructed despite the theoretical realisation that this is so:

Although I may know, on an epistemological level, that my identity is constructed from the mix of elements in my particular society, I do not, and, I think, cannot, experience my identity as this fluid construction. On the level of experience, I must know myself as a stable self, as the entity that provides continuity to the disparate elements of my life, as the deep self who makes choice possible. (p. 18)

Hekman (1999) argues that there may be a point in between these two extreme positions where “a sense of identity that, although constructed, is a stable and necessary component of human selfhood and agency” (p. 19). She suggests that there must be a coherent self who chooses the identities that constitute it.

Francis (2002) argues that in lived experience most people operate according to a modernist conception of the self. Therefore it is only through theorising that “we position ourselves as believers in the death of the coherent self” (Francis, 2002, p. 47).

Further, Francis argues:

The discourse of individuality seems to me to be one of the most dominant, possibility *the* most dominant, in Western society. The reason that we calmly consider the deconstruction of the self argued in post-structuralist and post-modernist theories, even engage with them and draw on them theoretically, is because they have little impact on our personal lives: we engage with them at a purely theoretical level. To actually begin to feel that we do not have a coherent personality and freedom of choice would be devastating, with arguably terrifying consequences in terms of the meaningfulness of our lives (and for our attempts at political improvement). (p. 47)

Francis (2002) argues that while “our positioning and presentation of ourselves differs in various interactive contexts, it is also the case that, for most of us, at some levels, our beliefs and presentation of self remain the same in all contexts” (p. 48). She suggests that the issue involves incorporating both the consistency and the diversity of the self into one perspective:

This continuation of belief and view of ourselves can be illustrated by the discomfort we often feel if in some conversation or other context we feel we have not been “true to our beliefs,” or presented a “false picture” of ourselves.

We are further able to act on these beliefs in (relatively) consistent ways. Hence, while agency is not “given”, and its extent is certainly impacted on by the subjects’ position in discourse, we *are* able to draw on particular discourses in (relatively) consistent ways, and to devise and implement strategies for change (p. 48).

Commonalities and coherencies in subjectivities emerged in this research specifically relating to the patterns evident in the construction of subjectivity (rather than the nature of experiences or subjectivities themselves). There were three common patterns that I observed in this research - firstly, the enmeshed and reciprocal relationship between individuals and society; secondly, the nature of subjective truths; and thirdly, the existence of subversive subjectivities. Each theme is discussed below.

11.3.1 Enmeshed and Reciprocal Relationships

Of particular concern to this thesis have been the factors that influence the development of subjectivity. I have argued that meanings made from past experiences, particularly traumatic childhood experiences, combine with dominant social discourses to create dominant subjective constructions⁵.

In addition to this, one of the characteristics of subjectivity that appeared in this thesis was the nature of the relationship between individual subjectivities and dominant social discourses. I have argued elsewhere⁶ that the relationship between individuals and society reflects an enmeshment, indicative of a reciprocal relationship, where individual subjectivities are mirrored and reinforced in dominant discourses which then reinforce individual subjective constructions and so on. This was most evident in research participants’ accounts in relation to self-esteem and competition, fear and intolerance of difference, and personal and social change.

Therefore the construction of subjectivity may not simply be a process of individuals randomly internalising aspects of dominant discourses but rather a complex interplay between individuals and society which acts to reinforce the dominance of certain discourses, both individually and socially. This is significant not only in terms of how subjectivity is developed but also in the perceived limitations and complexities of change.

⁵ Refer to chapter nine.

⁶ Refer to section 9.3

11.3.2 The Nature of Subjective Truths

In this thesis it appeared that research participants' multiple subjective constructions determined what was regarded as true. This then translated into different and often conflicting truths within the person, reflecting the presence of different subjectivities co-existing. The conflicting nature of subjective truths was evident in my work with research participants in a variety of ways, most specifically in inconsistencies in the ways people told their stories.

One possible explanation for these conflicting truths follows the postmodern argument that truth is multifaceted and that rather than one truth and one reality, there are many. When one truth is asserted it is an expression of power, rather than the appearance of unity and stability in society, because it depends on the suppression of differences and therefore, the suppression of other truths. Within this system, some discourses are silenced (Crowley & Himmelweit, 1992; Flax, 1990a; Graham et al., 1992; Lovibond, 1989; Zalewski, 2000). So, it can be argued that for each person there are many subjective truths, but that some are dominant and act to suppress others. Commonly, the dominant subjective truth is a system-supporting one which acts to silence other truths. The reciprocal relationship between individual subjectivities and dominant discourses attempts to regulate what is regarded as 'true' both individually and socially.

The meanings made from experiences are influenced by the dominant social discourse which may be at odds with other subjective truths that a person experiences. Despite this, the pervasiveness of the enmeshed relationship between individual subjectivity and dominant social discourses means that these perceptions or explanations are often unchallenged and become internalised as a form of truth, a dimension of subjectivity.

For example, Jan and Shaun both internalised a social and familial perspective that they were 'bad.' This perspective became their 'truth' and they acted according to this belief. Yet on reflection they were both able to acknowledge that this perception masked a deeper feeling and that they 'knew' that this was not the case. This was also my own personal experience as I internalised a belief that I was intellectually inferior to my siblings which then became my dominant truth.

I am arguing here that this process of internalising dominant social truths is a potent one in the construction of subjectivity and, I believe, significant with regard to issues of

agency and social change. When dominant subjective constructions reflect dominant social discourses the effect is system supporting. Given both the pervasive and closed nature of dominant social discourses and the social contextual milieu of experience, it is not surprising that subjective truth is so often saturated by dominant discursive constructions. It follows that there will be subjective constructions that are suppressed in each person, particularly those that may be in contradiction to the dominant subjective constructions. I am suggesting that these suppressed subjectivities may hold subversive potential and may be useful in disrupting dominant system supporting discourses about subjectivity. Flax (1993a) explains a similar process:

The unitary self is an effect of many kinds of relations of domination. It can only sustain its unity by splitting off or repressing other parts of its own and others' subjectivity. Too much isolation of one dimension from others will have serious intra- and intersubjective effects. Such isolation can be achieved only by turning other aspects of subjectivity into dangerous and alien others requiring punitive control. Since these others are integrally related to the favoured part, a hierarchical relation of domination must be established and maintained. Ambiguity and boundary-crossing are increasingly intolerable. Even if the initial motive for such isolation was emancipatory, eventually its repressive consequences will be evident. The long-term costs of such a strategy will outweigh its immediate gains. To retain control, the dominating part must establish perpetually uneasy and insecure relations of mastery over its lesser "others". (pp. 109-110)

11.3.3 Subversive Subjectivities

I have argued that the methodology adopted in this research exposed aspects of subjectivity that may otherwise have been suppressed. In relation to the previous section, it appears that some subjective constructions are suppressed because of their opposition to dominant social discourses. While these suppressed subjectivities were often unspoken, they became obvious through attention to the dynamics and the different levels of communication which were apparent in my interactions with research participants. I am suggesting that these subjectivities may hold potential to disrupt dominant discourses given that they typically reflect truths that challenge traditional views of subjectivity. The following two sections explore each of these potentially subversive subjectivities – inconsistencies and contradictions, and the discourse of pain and vulnerability.

11.4 Subverting Subjectivities: Inconsistencies and Contradictions

Many inconsistencies and contradiction appeared throughout my interactions with research participants. I believe that these inconsistencies and contradictions were indicative of suppressed subjectivities competing with dominant ones. This relates to arguments presented earlier in this chapter in that these contradictions emerged most commonly when research participants presented system supporting interpretations of their stories. Through paying attention to the appearance of these inconsistencies and contradictions, areas of subjectivity that are normally silenced and suppressed became obvious to me.

Giroux (1991) argues that there is a “need to mine ... contradictory and oppositional insights so that they might be appropriated in the service of a radical project of democratic struggle” (p. 17). Flax (1990a) highlights the importance of exploring the suppressed aspects of a story:

Like repressed material in the unconscious, the suppressed within a story does not lose its power; it affects the character of the whole. Recovering the suppressed allows the strains and self-divisions that are an at least equally important part of the story to reappear. This rereading transforms the story’s meaning for us and lessens its hold on or power over us. (pp. 37-38)

In this research two issues emerged through attending to these contradictions – emotions, particularly pain and vulnerability; and the importance of a conscious and reflective relationship with subjectivity. I will argue in the remainder of this chapter that both these aspects of subjectivity may hold potential to disrupt dominant subjective constructions.

11.5 Subversive Subjectivities: Pain and Vulnerability

In a general sense this research attested to the importance of emotions in the construction of subjectivity. Within this general finding, the specific emotions of pain and vulnerability became important. I am suggesting that the discourse of emotions is in conflict with dominant constructions of subjectivity and therefore also often in conflict with internalised dominant subjective constructions. Relatedly I am suggesting that the feeling dimension of our subjectivities is commonly dismissed as socially undesirable and therefore becomes a repressed subjectivity.

This social devaluing of emotions, and the perception that vulnerability is a form of weakness, is of particular concern to feminism as it relates to the gendered nature of dualistic thought in society (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Fineman, 2000; Jaggar, 1989; Lupton, 1998; Williams, 1998; Williams & Bendelow, 1998). In addition to the devaluing of emotions, people in Western societies are encouraged to deny and suppress their emotions (Jaggar, 1989; Lupton, 1998; Williams & Bendelow, 1998). However, as Jaggar points out, “lack of awareness of emotions certainly does not mean that emotions are not present subconsciously or unconsciously or that subterranean emotions do not exert a continuing influence on people’s articulated values and observations, thoughts and actions” (p. 155). Jaggar extends this argument:

It is now widely accepted that the suppression and repression of emotion has damaging if not explosive consequences. There is general acknowledgement that no one can avoid at some time experiencing emotions she or he finds unpleasant, and there is also increasing recognition that the denial of such emotions is likely to result in hysterical disorders of thought and behaviour, in projecting one’s own emotions on to others, in displacing them to inappropriate situations, or in psychosomatic ailments. (p. 167)

Jaggar (1989) states that emotions are vital to human survival and that “life without emotion would be life without any meaning” (p. 155). Williams and Bendelow (1998) make the point that emotions are critical in terms of the relationship between subjectivity and society:

In short, the emphasis here is on the active, emotionally expressive body, as the basis of self, sociality, meaning and order, located within the broader sociocultural realms of everyday life and the ritualised forms of interaction and exchange they involve. (p. xxvii)

Nicholson (1999) observes a change in the social acknowledgement of emotions, or what she terms, the ‘growing publicity of emotion’ particularly in relation to increased interest in therapeutic modalities. However, as she points out there are dangers in this development given the focus on individualism that often accompanies it:

These therapeutic movements manifest important cultural shifts in a variety of ways. For one, their existence has meant the creation of new forms of public space where emotion is given attention. The phenomenon of increasing numbers of individuals going to see therapists in their offices, to church, school, or YMCA basements to attend twelve-step programs, or to expensive resorts to engage in weekends of mass psychic rejuvenation has meant that it has become increasingly acceptable to focus on one’s emotions in the company of virtual strangers. (p. 152)

Lack of recognition for the centrality of emotions is one of the feminist critiques of postmodernism where the emphasis tends to lie with language and thought as key determinants of meaning. The inadequacy of language to convey the full meaning of an interaction was starkly evident to me in my research. The other forms of communication that I felt were constantly being used through the research sessions were often not consistent with the words used by participants. The role of emotion and its expression through our interactions was a significant issue and one that has suggested the limitations of the postmodern notion of language as the sole constructor of subjectivity (Lupton, 1998).

Lupton (1998) challenges the view that emotions do not exist outside of language and she calls on postmodernist theorising on emotions to reinstate the 'body' as part of this theorising:

Indeed, language can frequently sadly fail our needs when we try to articulate our feelings to another person. Facial expressions or bodily movements and other physical signs can often be far better indicators of a person's emotional state than words. Such fleshy manifestations, indeed, frequently "betray" emotional states even as an individual may seek to cover them over or deny them using language. (p. 32)

Flax (1993a) stresses the importance of these other dimensions to life and the importance of embracing different perspectives on these forces that construct subjectivity. She challenges postmodernism with the claim that it is not applying the same standards to its own theory as to the others it is so critical of:

No singular category can do justice to the vast and highly differentiated variety of processes in and through which subjectivity can be constituted and expressed. An implicit privileging of language, speech, and writing circulates through this one. Many aspects of subjectivity and its practices are denied, obscured, or marginalised. Discourse is a particularly inapt synonym for practices (for example, ballet or breastfeeding) which are predominantly affective, sensuous, visual, tactile, or kinetic. These qualities are important in the constitution and expression of subjectivities. (p. 100)

I am suggesting here that it is this lack of connection to language, for which postmodernism has been criticised, that may make emotions important in terms of agency and social change. Nicholson (1999) makes this same point:

In part, the modern conception of an "emotion" is distinguished from other psychic phenomena because it represents the relatively non-linguistic; it is also distinguished by its subjective intensity. The word has been used to depict contexts where we sense something strongly and yet do not quite possess the language for it. This suggestion of a more tenuous connection with language

than is, for example, true of “beliefs” has also been carried into the meaning of “feelings.” Consequently, what are called emotions or feelings can represent forms of resistance to what can be said. ... But, in so far as emotions or feelings do stand for reactions that exist more than other psychic phenomena outside of language, to legitimate them is also to provide space for the at least potentially disruptive. (p. 155)

There seems widespread recognition of the role that emotions play in social and personal change and in the construction of subjectivity. Lupton (1998) has stressed that “emotional responses are viewed as important sources of human values and ethics and as a proper basis for political action” (p. 3). Langman and Scatamburlo (1996) argue that “political agency begins to emerge when distress that may be either personal or felt through empathic recognition, prompts people to come together, share experiences and perhaps (but not necessarily) mobilise” (p. 134). bell hooks (1994) talks about the notion of ‘pain’ and has suggested that “[i]t is not easy to name our pain, to make it a location for theorising,” (p. 74) even though liberatory theory arises from such a process. She continues:

If we create feminist theory, feminist movements that address this pain, we will have no difficulty building a mass-based feminist resistance struggle. There will be no gap between feminist theory and feminist practice. (p. 75)

Williams (1998) talks about the recalcitrant nature of emotions and their capacity to transgress the boundaries that attempt to contain them:

From the loss of self in eroticism to the aggression vented in gang warfare, and from the “unruly” behaviour of a child to New Age movements, communal festivities, sporting and musical events, spontaneous emotions are “hard at work” in apparent defiance of social conventions, for better or worse, richer or poorer. (p. 762)

Jaggar (1989) refers to ‘outlaw emotions’ to describe unconventional emotional responses from people who are marginalised and typically outside the status quo. These ‘outlaw emotions’ are significant in terms of the capacity of emotions to produce agency and political action. She states:

Outlaw emotions may enable us to perceive the world differently from its portrayal in conventional descriptions. They may provide the first indications that something is wrong with the way alleged facts have been constructed, with accepted understandings of how things are. Conventionally unexpected or inappropriate emotions may precede our conscious recognition that accepted descriptions and justifications often conceal as much as reveal the prevailing state of affairs. Only when we reflect on our initially puzzling irritability, revulsion, anger, or fear may we bring to consciousness our “gut-level” awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice, or danger.

Thus, conventionally inexplicable emotions ... may lead us to make subversive observations that challenge dominant conceptions of the status quo. (p. 161)

Lyon (1998) suggests that emotions have a significant role in the agency of the body and of the place of the body in society. Lupton (1998) claims that emotions are central to the construction of our sense of self and to our wider conception of ourselves in that they give meaning and provide explanation to our lives. Meyerson (2000) points out that the social world as we know it would be significantly different “if emotions – in all their depth and complexity – were honoured as the ‘stuff’ of social experience” (p. 168).

Through my interactions with research participants it appeared that dominant subjective constructions often required a disconnection with people’s emotions, particularly those of pain and vulnerability. However, these emotions emerged in my encounters with all research participants, with variations in terms of the level of incorporation or acceptance of these emotions. In those stories where research participants presented system supporting stories, I experienced their emotional responses as suppressed and emerging only through non-verbal means. However, it also appeared that when participants were conscious of their emotions their capacity to challenge dominant subjective constructions appeared to be enhanced. This relates to Jaggar’s (1989) concept of ‘outlaw emotions’ and the ways in which emotional responses might indicate something previously unseen in dominant discourses.

In a tentative way this research suggested that the suppression of emotions underpins and maintains the reciprocal and enmeshed relationship between individuals and society. I perceived an inter-relationship between the expression of low self-esteem, fear and personal agency amongst research participants in that feeling negatively about one’s self is typically suppressed on an emotional level, yet these beliefs influence a person’s behaviour and choices. For example, these emotions may result in people being less tolerant of others who are different from them. Both of these dynamics (low self-esteem and fear of others’ difference) could reduce capacity for agency and political action. The relationship between agency and self-esteem is potentially significant and is addressed further in the following section.

11.6 Subjectivities, Reflection and Agency

An ongoing issue of concern for postmodern feminism has been the tension between the constituting subject of modernism and the constituted subject of postmodernism, and the implications of this for agency and political action⁷. This thesis has suggested a reconceptualisation of subjectivity wherein it is regarded as both constituted and constituting - as multiple and fragmented and with a consequent emphasis on the desirability of a conscious relationship between these multiple and fragmented subjectivities. This relates to the discussion earlier in this chapter where it was suggested that subjectivity is multiple and fragmented and yet may also be seen as coherent. Flax (1996) states that subjectivity refers to “the multiple positions of subjects as agents and object, as neither purely determined nor determining” (p. 578).

The importance of relationship with self emerged in the research through attention to contradictions and inconsistencies. I am suggesting here that a conscious and reflective relationship with self may provide greater opportunities for agency, and therefore, political action.

Flax (1996) discusses the therapeutic relationship from a postmodern perspective and her use of the concept of ‘frames’ relates to this point about the importance of a conscious and reflective relationship with subjectivities:

Over time, what seemed like truth may now be seen by the patient as a frame. Having seen one truth as a frame, the patient can extend this awareness to others. He or she can develop the ability to identify the constituting frames and use this awareness intrapsychically. Certain frames, for example abandonment, may produce intense pain. The patient can either tolerate it until an alternative frame emerges or actively move into another frame that allows access to a different feeling space or alternate construction of the same event. She or he can look at the same experience from a variety of frames and see the dependence of feelings on the perspectives in which they occur. This provides a certain freedom to experience feelings and ideas more fully. The more delimited certain feelings and ideas become, the more they can be tolerated. They are simply a feeling place or meaning construction among the multiple possibilities and spaces that presently constitute the subject. Alternate spaces and interpretations may emerge. The capacity to delimit and move among internal spaces and to anticipate, occupy, hold, use, and detach from multiple frames expresses and contributes to the further development of a fluid, multiple subjectivity. (p. 590)

The research stories presented here differed (according to my interpretation) depending on how much the internalised dominant social message remained accepted and

⁷ Refer to chapter five.

unchallenged. In some cases (Jan, Claire, Jack, Miriam, Rose, Elizabeth) these messages were actively challenged and I perceived that this created space for these people to allow other understandings and subjective truths, including their emotional responses, that were previously suppressed through internalising dominant social messages. These 'new' understandings re-emerged and became the primary way in which they told the story of their experiences. For example, Claire's story illustrated the ways in which she had moved from internalising dominant social perceptions (specifically about her experiences of sexual violence) to challenging these views and the detrimental effect they had on her, thereby allowing the emergence of another dimension of subjectivity which was more positive in regard to how she felt about herself.

In a general sense, it has been my observation that dominant social constructions typically result in a person's low self-esteem, whereas challenging these constructions may replace these negative views with a more positive sense of self.

A critical aspect of this conscious relationship with self includes the capacity for reflection. Alcoff (1988), writing about the work of de Lauretis, describes this process:

All women can (and do) think about, criticise, and alter discourse and, thus, ... subjectivity can be reconstructed through the process of reflective practice. The key component of de Lauretis' formulation is the dynamic she poses at the heart of subjectivity: a fluid interaction in constant motion and open to alteration by self-analysing practice. (p. 425)

Jaggar (1989) considers critical reflection, especially on emotions, as central to political action and social transformation. Weedon (1987) positions the postmodern subject as both agentic and reflective:

Although the subject in poststructuralism is socially constructed in discursive practices, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices. She is also a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available. (p. 125)

My central argument therefore is that subjectivity is constructed in Western society in such a way as to discourage a conscious and reflective relationship with subjectivities. Therefore, certain aspects of subjectivity are internalised and repressed, particularly emotional subjectivities. Through internalising dominant truths, personal agency is limited. On the other hand, an implication of this work is to call attention to a form of

subjectivity that is based on a conscious and reflective relationship with self, valuing emotions as potent forms of knowing. This then, may provide potential for people to feel more positively about themselves, to challenge dominant constructions and, given the reciprocal and enmeshed relationship between individuals and society, this may lead to disruptions in dominant subjective constructions.

11.7 Conclusion

This thesis has sought to make a contribution to postmodern feminist perspectives on the relationship between subjectivity, agency and social change. My purpose was initially to explore the relationships between individuals and society and between theory and practice, to ascertain possibilities for social change through a reconceptualisation of these relationships. I approached the research from a modernist feminist perspective which challenged many of the assumptions of Enlightenment thought. Feminist personal narrative was employed with five youth workers and four young people.

Through the analysis of the research interactions the inadequacies of my original approach to theorising became evident and a subsequent reconceptualisation occurred, drawing on the insights of postmodernism, and particular postmodern feminism. This transition in theorising necessitated an exploration of both modern and postmodern feminist perspectives, as reflected in the four literature review chapters.

The concluding arguments of this research have challenged the modernist assumptions inherent in my attempts to create 'truer' knowledge, as I was confronted with the complexities of truth and both the possibilities and limitations of theorising. Consistent throughout all the findings of this research has been a level of complexity in the relationships I initially set out to study. This level of complexity in the process was previously hidden within the more linear and simplistic approach characteristic of modernism and positivist research approaches.

This reconceptualisation resulted in a focus on the construction of subjectivity with particular emphasis on the possibilities for agency in the decentered subject. I have argued for a reconceptualisation of subjectivity where the emphasis is placed on the importance of a conscious and reflective relationship with multiple subjective constructions, and particular attention to the discourse of emotions. Through attention to

this relationship and suppressed subjectivities such as emotions, opportunities for agency and political action may be enhanced.

Future work on the construction of subjectivity, and particularly the role of emotions in agency, is indicated from this research. Also the issue of the body and its place in subjective constructions has not been addressed here and it constitutes a significant area of interest within postmodern feminism. The nature of the coherent and yet fragmentary self also remains an ongoing question for investigation. Relatedly, it may be possible to construct a typology of the different levels of relationship with self vis-à-vis the internalisation of dominant social discourses and therefore the potential for system challenging subjectivities. This issue requires further research to specifically explore the nature of these interrelationships

Ongoing work in the area of truth, subjectivity, agency and political action are imperative to the political project of (postmodern) feminism. This continued research may be central in the creation of a more equitable and just society.

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APPENDIX A

Letter sent to youth workers regarding participation in the research

Dear

I am writing in relation to our telephone conversation about my research project concerning youth work practice with marginalised young people. At that time I informed you that I would be sending you some further information to assist you in making your decision about whether or not to be involved.

I have enclosed an information sheet where I have attempted to anticipate some of your questions in relation to the project. I've tried to answer these to the best of my ability at this stage – I hope it makes sense. I have also attached a copy of the consent form. Should you eventually decided to become involved in the project, you will be required to sign this form. I have included it here simply so you will be aware of its existence and its content. You don't need to do anything else with it at this stage – until you've made the decision about your participation.

I encourage you to discuss your potential involvement in this project with someone else, let them read the information I'm sending you. They may be able to assist you in identifying some of the issues about your participation in the project.

I will contact you again in a week or so and if you are still interested in being involved, we might be able to arrange a time to meet and further discuss some of these issues or any other questions you might have.

Thanks for your interest -

Kind regards,

Jenny Gilmore

APPENDIX B

Information Sheet for young people

YOUTH WORK RESEARCH PROJECT

Information Sheet: Young People

To try to help you make a decision about your involvement in this research project, I've listed a lot of questions that I thought you might want to ask and I've tried to answer them. It might be a really good idea to discuss some of these issues with someone else. If you have someone who knows you well, you might like to share this information sheet with them and have a chat about your decision.

What is the project about?

This research project is about trying to develop some ways of working with young people that takes into account how young people feel and what they think about their lives and experiences. It is also about youth workers and what they do, why they do it, and how they might do it differently. I am interested in the sorts of experiences that you have had and the way that they might relate to the sort of society that we live in. I'm also interested in trying to look for ways that we can change some of the things in society that contribute to young people being disadvantaged.

As well as spending time with young people and youth workers, I am also doing a lot of reading about theories and ideas that might be useful and relevant to youth work practice. Hopefully, some of the theories that I'm using will help to make some sense of the experiences we will be talking about.

Why do you want young people to be involved?

I want to involve young people because I believe that research about young people should come from young people. This research is about young people and youth workers so it is involving young people and youth workers.

What would I have to do?

I've got some ideas about how we would work together but a lot of the ideas will probably come from you. Basically, I'd like you to share with me some of your experiences and some of the things that have happened to you in your life. We might use a whole lot of different ways of doing that from talking, telling stories, drawings, taking photos – whatever we want.

But that's not all though. I don't just want you to give me all your information, I also want you to help me understand it in relation to the sort of society that we live in. So, I want to talk about some of my ideas about the way that we all live and hear what some of your ideas are too.

I am really asking for young people to help me understand the sorts of experiences that you have had so that we can try to work together to come to some understanding about why they might have happened and how things could be different in the future.

How often would we be meeting?

I imagine that we would need to spend some time together every 3 weeks or so for about 6 months. That's a lot of time and whilst we might not meet that often, we certainly won't meet any more than that. We can work out times that suit us both.

What if I don't want to tell you something?

You don't need to tell me anything you don't want to. If we start talking about something and you feel uncomfortable, you just need to tell me and we won't discuss it any more. You have control over what we do and what we discuss.

What happens if I want to stop being involved?

You can decide to stop being involved in the project at any time. You may decide that you don't want me to use the information you've already given me and that's fine – just tell me. You don't even have to give a reason.

Will you tell anyone else what I've said?

No – definitely not. All the information collected in this project will be strictly confidential. I won't tell anyone your name or any other information that could identify you. All the names will be changed before I write anything down.

What is your (Jenny) involvement in the project?

This research project is my PhD thesis, so I am responsible for the development and direction of the project. Even though it is all my own work, I think it is really important to involve young people and youth workers in the research for the reasons I've already outlined.

My role with the young people who are involved in the project will mainly be to give some direction to what we are doing. I don't have a fixed idea of all the things we might do because I'd like us to come up with some ideas together, but I do have some suggestions. As well as this, I also have a role in this group as a participant by looking at the sorts of experiences I had as a young person and how they might relate to the issues we are talking about in this project.

Why should I be involved?

I guess the main reason is because by being involved you will be helping other young people in situations like you and also helping youth workers to get an understanding of your issues and needs and some ways of working with other young people.

As well as that, I hope that you might learn some things as we work together – about our society, about yourself, about youth work, or whatever.

Are there any negative things about being involved in this research project?

I think you need to really think about this question. There mayn be some things about being involved in this project that you wont like. If you can identify them now, we can talk about it before you make your decision.

My feeling is that the main issue for young people involved in this project is that it may be difficult or painful for you to talk about some of your past experiences. Whilst I wont ask you to talk about anything you don't want to you need to think about how you feel about this issue.

What do I do now?

Have a think about some of the issues I've raised here and some of the things we've talked about before when we've met. I think it's a good idea for you to have a chat with someone else about whether or not you should be involved – they might be able to help you make your decision.

If you've read this and decided that you're not interested, just tell me. If you are interested, have a chat with someone else and then we will meet again in the next few weeks to see if you have any other questions before you decide.

Thanks -

Jenny Gilmore
Phone – 356 2316

APPENDIX C

Information Sheet for youth workers

YOUTH WORK PRACTICE RESEARCH PROJECT

Information Sheet: Youth Workers

What is the research about?

The purpose of this research is to develop ideas and strategies about youth work practice. This will be achieved by my work with a small group of young people and a small group of youth workers, in addition to my own research and youth work practice.

An important focus of this project is to attempt to understand young people's experiences and youth work practices, in a way that allows us to make some changes to the social system. Rather than reinforce social patterns that effect the life experiences of marginalised young people, this project seeks to develop processes that will challenge and change these social structures and relations. I am particularly interested in the way that we rarely see the connections between broader social forces and our individual experiences.

Another important issue in this project is that I am attempting to generate a perspective on youth work practice that actually comes from our practice experiences and from young people's lives. In this sense it will be a dynamic, changing process that will evolve as the project proceeds. Also, hopefully at the completion of the project this perspective will have some relevance for youth workers in the field.

What are you looking for in choosing the youth workers?

There are very few requirements for your involvement. The main requirement is that you must be working directly with young people and this must be a major part of your work. Apart from this, I would imagine that people who choose to be involved will be interested in the sorts of issues I am looking at in this project.

What will be the nature of my involvement?

The purpose of your involvement is to provide the research project with insights into the issues facing you, as youth workers in the field, and to spend time reflecting on the nature of your youth work practice. By doing this we will be creating a dynamic research process where our actions constantly inform our thinking about the issues and future directions of the research.

You will be asked to discuss issues relating to your present work with young people and to reflect on why you might work in certain ways. We will also be thinking about different ways of working that might address some of the issues previously raised. Whilst I might encourage you to try out the strategies we discuss, there will be no pressure or necessity for you to do anything that you do not wish to.

How much of my time will be required?

At this stage I anticipate that we will work together for approximately 6 months, meeting one a fortnight for 2 hours. However, it is important that the project remains flexible and that these issues are negotiated at regular intervals. For example, we may decide that it suits us better to work for longer periods of time less often, or that we have achieved as much as we can after only 3 months. Whichever way we proceed, will always be with your full agreement.

It is planned that we will meet individually for the duration of the project, that is, you and I will meet alone each time. However, there are possibilities for all the youth workers involved in the project to meet and work together at times.

What is your (Jenny) involvement as researcher in this project?

This research project is my PhD thesis, therefore it is my work and I am responsible for its development and direction. However, rather than attempt to generate ideas about youth work from a detached position, I am attempting to involve both young people and youth workers in this process.

In relation to my role with the youth workers who are involved in the project, I will primarily act as a facilitator as well as providing some specific direction. However, I do not have a set view of the progress of our time together and I expect that we will, in part, negotiate that direction together.

I also have a role as participant in both these groups (youth workers and young people). I continue to work directly with young people and will use my insights from my work in relation to this research. I also am committed to understanding and sharing the experiences I had as a young person.

Do I need to have an understanding of feminism and other theories?

Absolutely not! Your involvement does not require anything other than experience in working directly with marginalised young people. Hopefully we will all learn a great deal throughout our time together.

What if I don't want to tell you about something?

You will never be encouraged to discuss something that you do not wish to talk about. You have the right to refuse to answer anything that I may ask.

What if I want to stop our meeting?

You may stop our meetings at any time without reason.

Will the information I give you be confidential?

Yes, your name or any other identifying details will not be disclosed. Your real name will not be used in any of the documentation gathered for this project. Information in this project will only be accessible to me.

What will I get out of my involvement in the research?

The primary benefit of an involvement in a research project such as this usually relates to the contribution that you will be providing to other people also interested in these issues (such as other youth workers and policy makers). However, I also feel that there are substantial benefits for you professionally in terms of opportunities to reflect on your practice, to further develop your youth work practice and strategies, and to develop greater understanding of the connections between your experiences of youth work and some of the broader social issues that impact on us.

There may also though, be some costs for you and I encourage you to think seriously about them. Certainly the amount of time required may be cost to either you personally or your work time. Also, I believe that it is hard work to reflect and challenge your own practices and it requires commitment to yourself, both personally and professionally, and to your work.

What if I decide that I no longer want to be involved in the research after we've started?

You may discontinue your involvement in this project at any time. You need not provide a reason or give me any notice. If you no longer wish to be involved you may also decide to ask me to not use any of the information we have previously discussed. It is important that your participation in this project is totally your decision.

Will I be kept informed of the progress of the research?

Yes, if you would like to maintain an involvement after our time together is complete, I will provide you regular reports about the progress of the project and you will be invited to several meetings where other people who have been involved will meet to discuss the project. At the completion of the project I will provide you with a summary of the final document.

Why is this research important?

I sincerely believe that this research is important for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it seems to me that there is very little research that attempts to provide stimulating ideas and strategies for youth workers in direct contact with marginalised young people. Whilst there are an increasing number of publications on issue specific youth matters (juvenile justice, homelessness) there seems to be little literature that explores the actual practice of youth work.

The other main reason that I consider this work important is because I believe strongly that theories that are developed must be useful to people in the field. I think that one way that we can attempt to ensure some sort of connection between the theory and the

practice is to make the practice (and the practitioners and 'clients') instrumental in the research or theory building process.

What do I do now?

I will contact you in a few days time to ask for your thoughts about your involvement. If you have read this information sheet and feel that you are not interested, you can tell me that when I contact you – please don't feel under any obligation to participate. If you are interested in being involved in the project, I will arrange to meet with you so that we can discuss any further questions that you might have. If you feel satisfied at this meeting, I will ask you to sign the consent form that is attached to this information sheet.

Thanks for your time.
Kind regards,

Jenny Gilmore
Phone: 365 2316

APPENDIX D

Consent Form for young people

YOUTH WORK PRACTICE RESEARCH PROJECT

Consent Form: Young People

I am willing to participate in the research project on Youth Work Practice conducted by Jenny Gilmore from the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at The University of Queensland.

I understand:

- * that my participation in this research project is voluntary;
- * the nature and purpose of this project as outlined in the information sheet and in my discussions with Jenny;
- * that my name and any other identifying information will remain strictly confidential;
- * that I have control over the issues discussed and that I may refuse to discuss a certain issue if I wish;
- * that I may decide to discontinue my involvement at any time without notice or reason;
- * that I may choose to withdraw any or all of my information at any time by contacting Jenny;
- * that I will be kept informed of the progress of the research and provided with a summary of the final thesis at the conclusion of the research project.

NAME:

SIGNATURE:

DATE:

APPENDIX E

Consent Form for youth workers

YOUTH WORK PRACTICE RESEARCH PROJECT

Consent Form: Youth Workers

I am willing to participate in the research project on Youth Work Practice conducted by Jenny Gilmore from the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at The University of Queensland.

I understand:

- * that my participation in this research project is voluntary;
- * that I must inform my employer of my participation in this project and any likely impact on my work;
- * the nature and purpose of this project as outlined in the information sheet and in my discussions with Jenny;
- * that my name and any other identifying information will remain strictly confidential;
- * that I have control over the issues discussed and that I may refuse to discuss a certain issue if I wish;
- * that I may decide to discontinue my involvement at any time without notice or reason;
- * that I may choose to withdraw any or all of my information at any time by contacting Jenny;
- * that I will be kept informed of the progress of the research and provided with a summary of the final thesis at the conclusion of the research project.

NAME:

SIGNATURE:

DATE:

APPENDIX F

Photographs of young people's artwork depicting their oral histories

APPENDIX G

Photographs of artwork depicting research participants' experience of involvement in the research

APPENDIX H

Background information about research participants

Nine people took part in this research, of whom five identified as youth workers (Jack, Miriam, Elizabeth, Jan and Rose) and four as young people (Claire, Lisa, Craig and Shaun)¹.

JACK:

Jack was a youth worker who had several years experience and had worked in a range of different youth services. Jack and I were previously known to each other through contact in the youth work field. Jack provided information about his background and experiences as a child and young person. Jack's parents were from a non-English speaking background. He stated that his family relationships had been difficult, especially his relationship with his father. Jack said that he lacked a sense of independence as a young person and that his adolescence was characterised by periods of heightened conflict with his parents, homelessness and violence. During this time he came into contact with a range of youth services and his work with a particular youth worker resulted in a reconciliation with his family.

Jack considered his early life experiences as foundational in his decision to be a social worker/youth worker. For Jack, the purpose of youth work is to assist young people to choose their own direction in life and to encourage them to explore options and consequences.

MIRIAM:

Miriam was also an experienced youth worker who was trained in social work and had worked with young people for several years. We did not have a prior relationship and Miriam joined the research with the hope that it would provide her with an opportunity to process her practice while also contributing to the research. Miriam shared a great deal of information about her personal life, her family and her experiences as a social worker.

¹ All research participants' names have been altered to ensure confidentiality.

Miriam described her childhood as positive, however she stated that she felt a tension between her relationships with her family and her present life (work, intimate relationship, current friends). Miriam said that her relationships with her family, especially her father, have become increasingly distant as she has moved closer to her ‘true self’ and her family have not supported this. Miriam spoke about a number of inconsistencies in her family that she now reacted to.

Because of this, consistency and integrity were important concepts for Miriam, especially between her personal and professional life and in her capacity to link her analysis and her actions. Miriam also stressed the importance of relationships in her work – between worker and young people, and the relationships that young people (and youth workers) have with themselves. Discussions about Miriam’s youth work practice were focused on her feminist practice perspective and her specific work with young women. Miriam described the purpose of her youth work practice with young women as being able to be alongside them, learning and creating together in a safe environment where the worker can provide some new perspectives and options that eventually challenge some ideas and beliefs.

ELIZABETH:

Elizabeth had been working in residential youth work for several years and was at that time employed in a crisis service working with homeless young people. Elizabeth and I were not known to each other prior to her involvement in the research. She stated that despite an interest in young people in general, she had not planned to specifically work in this area, but was ‘in the right place at the right time’. Elizabeth provided very few details about her family or her life as a child/young person, however she said that she had not had a difficult adolescence and therefore found it hard to empathise with the young people she worked with.

My work with Elizabeth was one of the most challenging and interesting interactions in the research. While my work with Jack and Miriam was largely affirming in terms of the consistency between their practice perspectives and my own, Elizabeth and I did not appear to share similar values and perspectives. From the beginning of our contact I found Elizabeth’s statements to reflect some strong stereotypes about young people; views that I had come to expect youth workers to challenge rather than support. However, one of the most significant aspects of Elizabeth’s story is the way in which

she shifted her perspective over the duration of the research. Our relationship changed over the course of the research, paralleling these changes in perspective for Elizabeth. The process of our relationship and the changes in her perspective have become central to the findings of this research.

JAN:

Jan was a youth worker who had extensive personal experience and had worked for a short time as a youth worker. While Jan and I did not have any prior relationship before commencing the research, we were known to each other in the field. Again, this interaction was not an easy one for me. Many inconsistencies emerged throughout my interactions with Jan.

Jan describes her life, and particularly, her adolescence, as involving a great deal of violence, offending, incarceration, and drugs. Jan said that throughout her childhood she was told that she was bad and that this theme has continued during her adult life. She was also consistently told that emotions should not be expressed. Jan relates these experiences to her decision to do youth work and her desire to contribute something positive to other young people. As with several other research participants, there are many connections between Jan's earlier life experiences and her youth work practice. Jan stated that her youth work practice was characterised by honesty, equality, challenging and being able to be challenged herself.

CLAIRE:

Claire came into the research after contact we had made in relation to another project. In this sense we were known to each other but did not have a well developed relationship. Claire talked openly and extensively about a range of personal and painful details from her life. Claire began her story from birth, where as the youngest of many children, she was unwanted by her father and her mother became seriously ill during Claire's birth. Claire's story is replete with accounts of extreme abuse – physical, sexual and emotional. From an early age Claire clearly recalls a fear of other people and a strong death wish, feeling that she did not belong in the world.

When Claire was 13 years old she was raped by a young man at a birthday party while other people stood and watched. Claire reported extensive impacts of this and other

abuses she experienced in her life and related this to her feelings of low self-esteem and many of the choices she had made as a young person.

Claire described her life as a young woman where she supported herself through sex work. Claire said that during this time she had experiences with a range of drugs and was involved in many violent relationships with older men. Claire believes she was attempting to express the pain she felt from her childhood through her behaviour. She said that it took many years before she was able to move on from these experiences and begin to feel more positive about herself and her abilities.

LISA:

Lisa's story again indicates the close relationship between the lives of young people and youth workers. Lisa participated in the research as both a young person (she was 18 years old when she commenced her involvement) and as a youth worker (she was undertaking paid work experience with a youth service). Lisa and I were both aware of the dual position that she would be speaking from and we attempted to give time to each position. Prior to commencing the research Lisa and I had met briefly through a mutual colleague but we were not well known to each other.

Lisa's life had been characterised by extreme violence. Her earliest memory (three years old) was of hiding in a cupboard with her grandmother as her father threatened to kill the family with a gun. When Lisa was three years old her parents separated and shortly after her mother remarried. Lisa also described extreme violence and control from her step-father.

Lisa said that her extreme hatred of her stepfather related mostly to his abuse of her mother, so much so that one night she attempted to '*cut his throat with a knife*' because she had had enough of his abuse. Lisa believes that this hatred of her stepfather is the sole reason why she, and her siblings, left home when they were very young.²

Lisa talked about her relationship with her mother as primarily characterised by a lack of affection with no overt displays of love for her. Lisa said she could not reconcile her mother's love for her with her inability to protect her from her step-father's violence.

² Lisa left home aged 14 years; her two siblings left when they were 15 and 16 years.

When Lisa was eight years old she was sexually abused by her stepfather's son (from his first marriage). Lisa said this was instrumental in the difficulties she experienced at school and her 'acting out' behaviours.

Lisa and I also discussed her beginning youth work practice and she identified the importance of workers being open minded and feeling positively about themselves as relevant for her practice.

CRAIG:

Craig and I had a pre-existing relationship from when I worked as a youth worker and Craig lived in a youth service that I was working in. Craig and I maintained irregular contact over a number of years and he had continued to express an interest in participating in the research since I had first mentioned it to him. However, I felt a strong resistance from Craig in relation to his involvement in the research and while he did not agree with this perspective, this example is indicative of a number of contradictions that I perceived throughout our time together.

Craig provided very little content about the details of his childhood and adolescence, reporting very few memories of his childhood. He stated that he grew up with his mother, stepfather and two siblings and has never had contact with his biological father. Craig had a positive and close relationship with his sister when they were children but now believes that they are complete opposites; he has little relationship with his stepbrother whom he sees as anti-social and subservient. Craig had a great deal of affection for his mother and he described their relationship as one where he consistently attempted to protect her from his stepfather's violence and abuse. Craig believes that his mother is passive and unable to stand up for what she believes in because of the way in which she has been 'brainwashed' by her husband (Craig's step-father).

Craig described ongoing and extreme physical violence from his stepfather. Craig believes that the difficulties he faced in his early life were exacerbated for him because of his experiences at school and his problems with authority.

After Craig left school his step-father became more violent and after an incident of violence Craig left home. He had no contact with his family for many years. He spent his time in shelters, squats and living on the streets, usually needing to steal money to

survive because he was not eligible for any sort of government benefit.³ Craig was able to provide much fuller accounts of his experiences during this time and he told stories of his offending, violence and camaraderie with other young people where he was depicted as a leader of his peer group. Craig continued to offend and the crimes he committed escalated in severity. He recounted many experiences of abuse and violence from police officers and the difficulties that he faced when imprisoned. Craig had recently been released from jail and was living in the community with his partner.

SHAUN:

Shaun and I also had extensive previous contact through my work as a youth worker when he was a young person. We had known each other in this capacity for several years and had then kept contact in an informal way during the intervening years. Shaun was in jail during my contact with him and this had a significant impact on the extent to which Shaun was able to speak about his experiences.

Shaun related his current identity issues and sense of not belonging back to when his grandparents adopted him from his biological mother at age one. He knows his biological mother as his sister and his grandparents as his parents. Shaun was unaware of this until his family informed him when he was 12 years old. He subsequently experienced a great deal of confusion and pain about this.

Shaun's early experiences of not feeling wanted by his biological mother and then adopted by his biological grandparents, who also stated that they didn't want him, were formative in terms of how he felt about himself. Shaun talked about his feelings that he was to blame for what happened to him and that he wanted to talk about it with them but never felt he could.

Shaun described the things that he was doing when he was young that led him to be incarcerated in a juvenile detention centre (despite having committed no crime), again stressing the themes of feeling devalued and not wanted. Shaun said he felt that he was unable to maintain accommodation in foster homes and was clear about the reasons why these placements didn't work for him.

³ Prior to 16 years of age it is very difficult for young people to receive a Commonwealth Government benefit as they are seen as the jurisdiction of the State Government. In this situation, Craig was 15 years old and had not come to the attention of the State Government welfare department and therefore he did not receive any income support.

ROSE:

Rose came into the research after having provided assistance to me in my attempts to locate some Indigenous young people and youth workers to participate in the research⁴. As a non-Indigenous person, Rose had significant experience in this area. As with many of the youth workers who participated in the research process, Rose was an experienced youth worker who shared her experiences from childhood and adolescence and the connection between these and her youth work practice. Rose described her earlier life as privileged in the sense that she had a stable family life and had received a good education. During her late adolescence Rose became involved with a group of young people who were using serious drugs and she became addicted to heroin for several years. Rose believes that this was indicative of her desire to test the limits and 'live life on the edge'. However, she also acknowledged that her involvement with drugs was partly related to her low self-esteem.

Rose described the primary motivation in her practice as the belief that change is important and has a greater chance of effectiveness when intervention occurs earlier in a young person's life. Rose stated that her relationships with young people were characterised by a sense of sharing, coupled with a recognition of the power inequities and differences in roles.

⁴ As previously noted, these attempts were unsuccessful.