Charting a politics of hope through representation

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Editor's summary:

Phillip Wadick comments 'I have been forced to insert my body into the frame as I contemplate what facilitates safe bodies'. His various representational forms support a position towards workplace health and safety research that offers alternatives to dominant structuralist and positivist paradigms that tend to objectify and commodify the body. His 'wanderings and wonderings' occur in a field where workers' are so sceptical of the about 'visibility politics' around safety they expose themselves to bodily risks. The disjunction between the 'theoretical and impersonal bodies' of dominant technical and medical discourses of workplace safety and the human encounters and social interactions affecting 'individual and personal bodies' led him to disrupt 'old certainties' and fixed oppositions in favour of poststructuralist thinking and alternative forms of representing knowledge. Hope emerged where workers 'found energy for change in the space between the arbitrary and unhelpful oppositions'.

Keywords: occupational health and safety education, representations, safe bodies.

Introduction

This paper traces the history of my thinking so that I can describe the methodological aspects of a PhD project finished in 2011, and in particular the methodological decisions I made throughout the process. Research in general is aimed at finding out new information, and educational research in particular is concerned about how people learn, what they learn and why they learn. Learning should translate into something new for the person, whether it be easily observable external behaviour or less easily measurable internal learning; in any event, it should result in some kind of change.

I work as a researcher-practitioner in the field of workplace health and safety (WHS), and my research is always based in and emerges from my practice, and in particular, the stories I hear and the things I see in my practice.

In this paper I firstly discuss an aetiology of WHS research and highlight the need for research that can highlight issues of power and affect in organisations. I then introduce how the researcher's ontology and epistemology influence the research process; following this I describe the unfolding of a methodological framework that is informed by post structural thinking but expands into a post modern emergent methodology that allows for new representations of data to be explored that chart an optimistic way forward by fostering a politics of hope. Finally, performance ethnography is suggested as a mode of representation that helps people learn by transforming their thinking as a response to data that demands an emotional and embodied response.

Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) Research

WHS is about keeping people, their bodies, safe. When I use the term "body", I mean the whole body, the physical, mental and emotional aspects of a person and their capacities to think, feel and act. It is the body which is at the centre of the struggle for a safe and healthy workplace, and it is the body which is the focus of power in the labour process (De Michiel, 1983:11). Much of the research in WHS uses epidemiology (University of Newcastle, 2009), defined by the Macquarie Dictionary (Macquarie Universtiy, 2001) as: 'the branch of medicine which deals with the study of the distribution and determinants of disease in populations and with investigations into the source and causes of infectious diseases'. Epidemiology is also about bodies, about what makes bodies unhealthy, although more about theoretical and impersonal bodies (Marshall, 1999 in Somerville, 2004:49) of broad populations, not so much about individual and personal bodies and their lived experiences.

It is the body, and its vulnerability, which has become the focus of the technology of prevention. Often, rather than eliminating hazards, the technology of prevention has concentrated on protecting the body by enclosing it in an array of protective gear (De Michiel, 1983:11). The body tends to become subordinated to the dangerous processes. This body, our body, is objectified and commodified by WHS arrangements. In New South Wales, for the purposes of workers compensation, the body is broken into its parts and functions and a dollar value put on each. For instance, if you lose the thumb on your left hand, you can be paid a maximum of $30,000; loss of sight in one eye is worth $40,000; loss of a toe (not big toe), is $6,000 (WorkCover NSW, 2012:65-66), and so on, our bodies defined in economic terms, measured against their usefulness, to us and to production.

Since the 1950s knowledge and understanding of the causes of work related disease and disability have grown dramatically (Goldenhar and Goldenhar, 1994:763). The implementation of WHS in workplaces is still understood primarily from a structuralist or positivist paradigm and its management largely viewed as a technical and medical phenomenon (Shannon et al., 1997:217). However, human interests and cultural, gendered and political values and ideas put their imprints on research methodology, practice and results (Alvesson, 2003:6). This means that this so-called objective science does not take into account how the researcher gathered the results, how people interact with these results, what they do with them and why they do this; that is, the sociological aspects of WHS. Even so, this scientific model of WHS management and research has made great strides in improving worker health and safety.

However, the scientific approach to research in my field was not going to answer the questions I was hearing concerning people in workplaces regularly coming up against power, influence, personal relationships, subterfuge, barely hidden agendas, symbolic representations, desire, people's needs, affect, fear, and mistrust. What workers were consistently saying to me was that these human encounters and social interactions were a major influence on their health and safety outcomes, and perhaps even more of an influence than the technical rational aspects of workplace health and safety such as machine guarding, exposure standards, rules and procedures. In fact, the struggles they experienced within the affective and symbolic domains tended to erode their faith and belief in health and safety and turned them against it, creating negative connotations around health and safety. Hence I needed a methodology that took into account emotions, affect, power, influence, and symbolism, and that would allow the data to be represented in ways that foregrounded these issues.

I could have ignored these power/influence and emotional issues, and told the people to just obey the rules and you should be right – that is, avoid the hard questions, focus on the easy answers, which were not actually answers to the workers questions, but were answers to other questions that somebody else thought should be answered (Goldenhar and Goldenhar, 1994:772). However, because

of who I am, and who I was (am) becoming, I needed to listen to the workers and somehow do justice to their concerns by making them visible, even though the answers are hard to find. This suggests two interconnected quandaries, the first being that perhaps research is not objective, and secondly that the researcher influences the process. I now briefly outline both of these conundrums.

Researcher ontology and epistemology

Researcher objectivity is a myth (Markham, 2005: 802) or a 'chimera' (Guba and Lincoln, 2005: 208). Positivist and quantitative research has always made strident efforts to avoid researcher bias, and, traditionally, qualitative researchers have attempted to achieve the same detachment so as not to influence the information gathered or the research outcomes (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). This is based on an ontology that believes in the existence of an authentic knowledge that can be known and an epistemology that unquestioningly privileges some forms of knowledge production over others. How is it not possible, then, for the researcher to influence the research – the researcher has a gender, an ethnicity, sexual preference, and political leanings; (s)he belongs to a social class, has lived an historical life, and views the world through feelings and emotions. For example, I, as researcher, am white, male, Caucasian, possibly middle class (from working class stock), middle aged and heterosexual. I have lived a life that has thrown me in with vagabonds, derelicts, hippies, (ex)prisoners, drug addicts, labourers, the poor, and religious zealots, many of whom were (are) disenfranchised, downtrodden, marginalised and preyed upon. They resist but often in futile ways that do not change the system that defines and categorises them. These traits and experiences necessarily colour my perceptions, my goals, and my interpretive/analytic lens.

Researcher values feed into the inquiry process: the researcher chooses the problem, chooses the theoretical framework, chooses the data gathering and analytic methods, and chooses the context (Guba and Lincoln, 2005:197). Research includes decisions about how to draw boundaries around groups, what to leave in as meaningful data and what to dismiss as unimportant, and how to explain what we think we know to our audiences. These research design decisions influence the framing of the research question and the representation of research participants and highlight particular findings while dismissing others. Therefore, it needs acute, reflexive methodological attention (Markham, 2005:815).

My methodology is informed by my epistemology as epistemology significantly shapes the conceptualization of problems, especially when demanding innovative solutions (Harteis et al., 2006). Epistemological beliefs effect learning and problem solving and establish a context within which intellectual resources are accessed and used (Jehng et al., 1993:24). By epistemology I mean what things I count as knowledge, whose knowledge this is, and whose truth it tells; that is, my fundamental assumptions about the nature of knowledge and learning (Bauer et al., 2004:284). I therefore need to explore my own epistemological beliefs because they influence what research I want to do, what information I want to gather, how I will gather it, how I analyse it, and what I do with it.

My subjectivity and epistemology have developed as a function of my life's unfolding. I have been injured several times throughout my life, and my reflection on the circumstances of these injuries influenced my decision to embark on a career in WHS. I have learned firsthand (that is, embodied and embedded learning) about the pressures for production, the masculine culture of risk taking, the tendency to ignore hidden risks with delayed consequences, the importance of seeking and giving opinions, and the need for proper training and supervision. I have been an employer and workplace trainer and consequently understand the power differentials operating in the workplace.

In my personal life I have dismantled and rebuilt my identity, my subjectivity, and my knowledge and belief system. This unraveling and re-creation has not been easy or quick, and has been accompanied by pain and joy as it has required my deep 'emotional involvement' (Salling Oleson, 2006:61), so I am under no illusion as to the difficulties in bringing about change in individuals. I have been empowered, and I have been disempowered. I have been the disenfranchised 'Other' who is scorned and marginalised; I have felt victimised by, and an outsider to, the capitalist system of production. I am no longer these things, but the process of transformation has influenced my world view.

However, transformation is not easy, because for such learning to occur the self must allow for the disruption of taken-for-granted ways of interpreting the world and open up to/create new knowledge, which can only be achieved when old certainties are permitted to be challenged.

This can be cathartic because it disrupts the effects of the surveillance of the normalizing processes of boundary work created by discourses. What do I mean by this? Discourses define, describe, permit and limit what can be thought, said, felt and breathed into action. They are at once offering scope and possibilities while they limit the scope of possibilities. They are powerful because they actively engage our inner critic to do their work of creating boundaries and then limiting the exchange between inside/outside, between us/them, between knowing/unknowing, along the edge place of these virtual boundaries. They continuously and methodically shore up the wall of the contact zone between this knowing and unknowing. They look for cracks and plaster them over, they fortify with buttresses of certainty to dismiss doubt; they even check for processes of osmosis that may secretly infuse new ideas, seeds of doubt, subterranean runners of knowledge from the outside. They limit the fertility of this potentially liminal edge place through denial, denigration and the gaze of colonising certainty.

As educators, can we disrupt this boundary keeping work, can we open up the walls to expose the inessential or unconvincing nature of this intangible fortressing wall? Can we allow the subject to relax the certainties long enough to fertilise, plant and nurture a vigorous garden of rich new thoughts and ideas? Well, we possibly can; the question is more like: How can we do this?

The fact that the boundary creation and maintenance of discursive formations is so successful demonstrates it is powerful and perhaps driven by ideology and affect in which its subjects have personally invested heavily in the creation of who they are, who they perceive they are and who they constantly are becoming. So disrupting the boundaries in any way challenges subjectivity, threatens the person's world of certainty that underpins their understandings of themselves and their place in the world. Hence, disruption is not easy. As people become subjects they engage their own felt embodied and sensual experiences that combine emotional, spiritual, bodily and intellectual functioning. Let's not kid ourselves that this deep learning can be unseated and challenged through purely cognitive means. In fact, new learning will be difficult if it does not underpin the intellectual/cognitive with the affective and emotional.

Conducting the research that is the subject of this paper has allowed me to, or perhaps insisted that I, reflect on my past to try and understand subjectivity. My narratives are not so much academic as they are existential as I try to extract meaning from my experiences rather than to depict them exactly as I lived them (Bochner, 2000:270). I have been forced to insert my body into the frame as I contemplate what facilitates safe bodies. My reflections on my life's unfolding demonstrates to me the importance of body/place relations to safety and how the drive to safety is instinctual. Writing the thesis and the story has given me the opportunity to synthesise and articulate my feelings and thoughts. Feelings precede thoughts, thoughts reflect on feelings, and feelings well from the body, as all knowledge starts with the sentient body that perceives the world through its senses (Zuboff, 1988:40).

Development of a methodological framework

I needed a methodology that took into account emotions, affect, power, influence, and I also needed to represent data in ways that featured these issues. I now trace a process that I iteratively, reflectively and reflexively developed to help me create such a methodology. This invention was not a sudden awakening or awareness of the way forward, but was more about long wanderings and wonderings inside myself, looking for clues, for burning desires, for ways of capturing the workers knowings that they so kindly revealed to me because they trusted me with their hearts and souls. With all these ideas swimming through my mind, I sought clarity by putting pen to paper, and wrote my thoughts that unfolded as a poem. I now present a few lines of this poem to demonstrate how, by allowing for the workers voices, I could capture some of their dilemmas:

What then should I research?

That's easy, think of all the stories you hear –

All those people who struggle and rail,

Rail against…….,

This discourse of health and safety

- it's only a splintered shard, an off-cut of profits

……implicates us all - we all become its keepers.

There's a battle for truth, delicately poised.

Read this, fill in that, do this, comply and you'll be right.

Wait on, that won't help, that's not right

What about common sense?

Altho who's got it I'm not sure

….I have, do you?

Alright, I'll call your bluff….

If you're true to your word,

Please fix this.

Ah, sorry mate, no time, no money…haven't you finished yet? We got customers waiting

Anyway, what else can we put right?

Ah, don't worry

WHAT CAN YOU DO!

Performing this poem to several audiences reinforced to me the need to capture the conundrums faced by workers because audience feedback clarified the importance of the workers' dilemmas. It became clearer to me that I needed to move away from the positivist approach and find a paradigm that had a different focus. I began to explore alternative paradigms that would help provide the framework to understand what people were saying. I firstly looked at the critical body of thinking because this often closely resembled the stories of the workers that kept repeating an "us versus them" storyline, boss versus worker. However, after some exploration here I decided to look further as this was situated within a conflictual binary and did not help answer the questions, but pitted worker against worker (bosses are workers too, and subject to the same pressures of the workplace), was more a function of discourse than some mythical objective truth, and does not account for power struggles and the affective domain of tangled relationships amongst workers of the same authority level within organisations. The critical approach assumed power was directed one way, autocratically from top to bottom, and the only power the lower workers had was in resistance. This is too simplified, and reading Foucault taught me that power is in fact rhizomatic, with tendrils everywhere, and that we all participate in its use in many and varied ways. He uses the term 'relations of power' (Foucault, 1984: 34) to describe how power suffuses social organisation in a capillary fashion (Foucault, 1980: 39). At the one and same time we have power over and are disempowered by people. We are both the 'sovereign subject' and the 'subjected subject' (Pile and Thrift, 1995b: 41).

I then looked at poststructural thinking and found that this helped me understand the issues that were constantly being talked about by the workers with whom I engaged through my job as WHS trainer and consultant. A poststructuralist approach from a post positivist paradigm is more interested in perspective and argues that reality is more like a prism or kaleidoscope (Silverman, 2005: 96) that changes as one moves between viewing positions. In particular I found feminist poststructural thinking really helped me focus on issues of power, identity formation, and subjectivity constitution, topics that workers' stories were mostly concerned about. Therefore, using poststructural feminist thinking and reading Foucault helped me pick apart power, subjectivity, performance and performativity (Butler, 2006:61) within the status quo, and agency. I expanded how I understood agency through writers such as Bronwyn Davies (Davies, 2000) who helped me see that agency is not just the humanist free will, because this is really just a repetition of the acts that are permitted within the discourse that defines the possibilities of acting; that is, the much touted concept of free will is more often purely making decisions that are sanctioned as the range of decisions that are permitted in any given circumstance. However, poststructural understanding of agency sees agency more as making decisions that go against the grain, that challenge the status quo of what is permitted to think and do, rather than just reinforce some aspect of it.

In trying to develop an understanding of these stories that I was hearing and theorise them from a Foucauldian and poststructural and feminist way of seeing the world, I found that representing this preliminary data in a cartoon or drawing helped me, more than words, flesh out my thinking (See Cartoon 1: WHS as Dressage). Laurel Richardson talks about writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000); I would expand that to include any textual play, which for me on this occasion was drawing. The cartoon helped me to understand, through visual portrayal, the struggles people regularly described and the interconnections they were making between the various symbolic interactions they experienced. Through my writing I am forced to articulate ideas that often sit at the intersection of disparate strands (Somerville, 2004:61) of WHS discourse; the writing seems to open up a powerful coalescence.

I produced data during my relationships with the participants according to traditional qualitative methods: in depth interviews, focus groups, open answer survey questionnaires, document analysis, reflective thinking and so on – normal qualitative methods of data collection. I coded the data for themes, iteratively moving back and forward between data and analysis. It is more the analytical framework I used to analyse and synthesize the meaning of the data that is influenced by feminist poststructuralism. In the analysis I was really deconstructing the stories – much, but not all, of the data was stories; deconstructing stories to look for what was hidden, for the meaning people were making from the events that they used stories to portray.

Data was analysed using deconstruction as a lens, especially focusing on issues such as the rhizomatic workings of power, whose interests were being served, how the 'boss versus worker' binary is a signifying space (Davies, 2000:38) that indicates worker subjectivities constituted within power relationships of management prerogative, which are hallmarks of our adversarial industrial relations system (Markey and Patmore, 2009:44). I also remained open to the unusual; for example, I chose to interview one particular person because I felt that he may present a 'deviant case' (Silverman, 2005:133) of 'counter narratives' (Andrews et al., 2004:109) that would test my understanding that WHS offers an opportunity for people to position themselves as effective WHS subjects. He had what I would loosely call a negative attitude to WHS, which I hoped would help me explore counter intuitive ideas that are either not mentioned or contra indicated in the literature (Silverman, 2005:65).

Cartoon 1. WHS as dressage
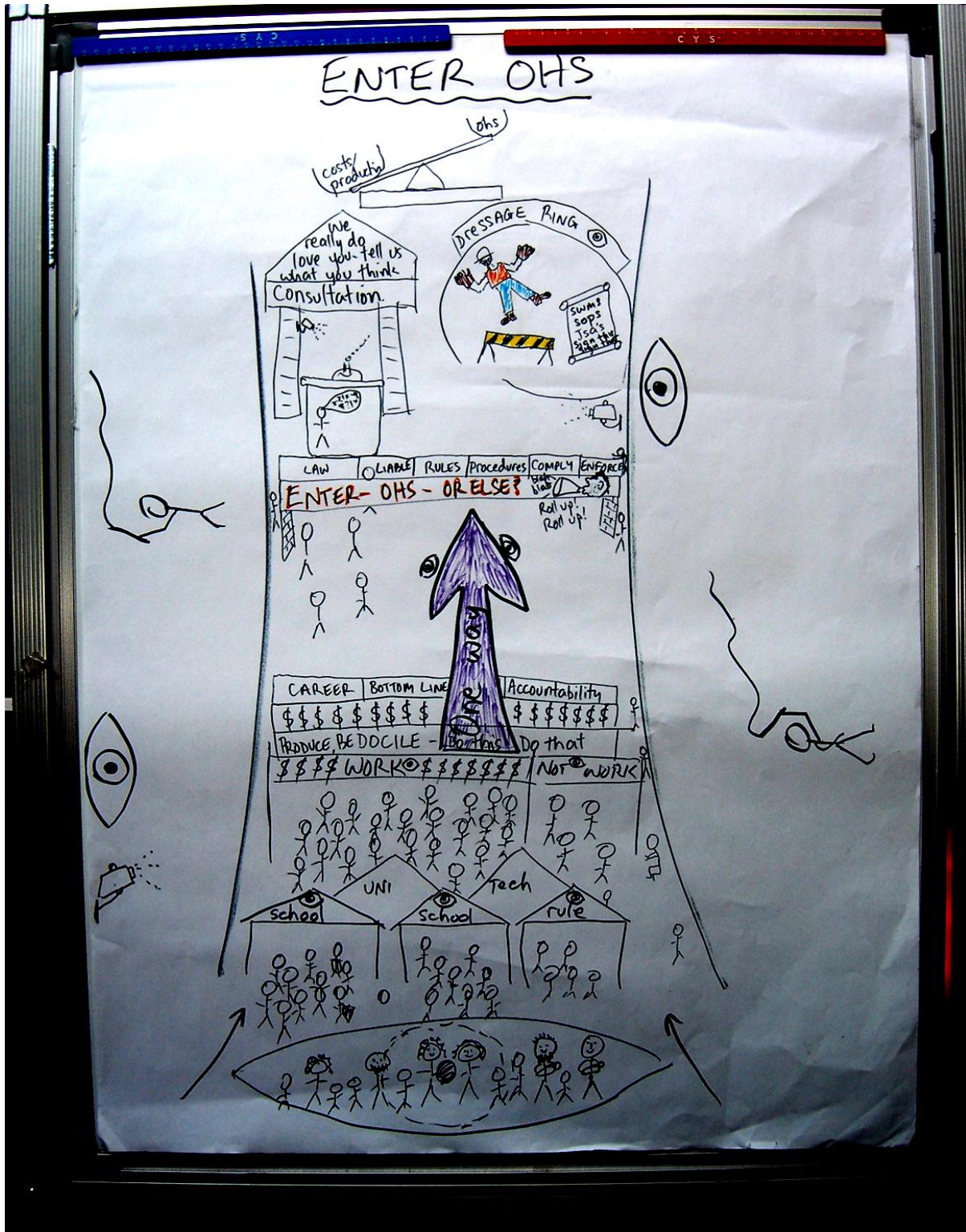
My analysis is influenced by a poststructural framework that searches for disjunctures, deconstructs metaphors, looks for dichotomies, silences, marginal asides and footnotes to show complications and difficulties (Martin, 2002:76). I look for taken-for-granted ideas and actions as well as such processes as discursive inclusion and exclusion practices (Søndergaard, 2002:189), and how these are constituted. For example, how has WHS discourse constructed subjects who take sides with one half of the binary boss versus worker, or us versus them? How does the discourse operate by keeping certain workers on the outside of power while making a hollow invitation to the inside (Silverman, 2005:53) through WHS consultation rhetoric?

Saukko (2005:343) notes that a tension exists between the hermeneutic interest in lived experience and poststructuralist interest in the critical analysis of the discourse that allowed for those same experiences. It is this nexus between lived experience and deconstruction that offers some of the greatest insights for the perceptive, reflexive and diligent researcher. My success with this research is predicated on my ability to expose the politics embedded in the discourses through which realities are constructed and perceived (Saukko, 2005:343). To help achieve this, I look for links between everyday discursive practice and how these reproduce institutional discourses and the status quo. I deconstruct those 'taken for granted' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2005:493) practices within discourses, reading them against the grain, searching for local displays of normalizing processes. For example, I probe behind the sentiment 'What can you do!' when this is a response to why they put up with unsafe conditions.

So, my data analysis focuses on how workers 'artfully put distinct discourses to work as they constitute their subjectivities and related social worlds' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2005:493). In Foucauldian terms, my goal has been to describe the interplay between institutional discourses and the 'dividing practices' (Foucault, 1965 in Holstein and Gubrium, 2005:493) that constitute local subjectivities and their worlds of experience so as to reveal the constitutive processes that produce and sustain peoples' realities.

When looking for themes I have been careful not to collapse all the voices of the research participants and repeat them as one voice mediated through my own interpretive lens as their 'hidden ventriloquist' (Markham, 2005:812). I have tried to allow all opinions to speak in polyphonic voices (Fontana and Frey, 2005:709) that allow the multiple perspectives of the various subjects to be proclaimed. My methods of data analysis have permitted any differences and problems encountered to be discussed rather than glossed over (Fontana and Frey, 2005:709).

A problem I was having with feminist poststructuralism was that it was very good for deconstructing people's experiences and showcasing the workings of power and discourse, but it left me with a feeling of ennui, with no resolution. Because of my ontology and epistemology, and both my trade and professional backgrounds, I wanted practical outcomes from this research, I wanted to be able to articulate and represent the new knowledges that had been created through the research process. Poststructural analysis did not provide me with a framework for charting an optimistic way forward. Somerville (2007, 2008) conceptualises this creating the new and the hopeful, of becoming other to who we are, an 'epistemology of post modern emergence' (Somerville, 2007:236). What this requires is the development of new optimistic and hopeful story lines which is possible if one takes the view that subjectivity is based in an ontology of becoming rather than of essence (Walsh and Bahnish, 2002:34). For me, the inclusion of a post modern emergent methodology enabled the conceptualising of new subjectivities and new knowledges, including alternative modes of representation such as poetry, creative writing, drama and cartoon. A politics of hope was developed by finding examples of where workers had disrupted historically produced binaries and found energy for change in the space between the arbitrary and unhelpful oppositions.

Somerville also notes that Richardson (1994, in Somerville, 2007:226) claims that writing is not only data collection and analysis, but also representation – it is the way we provide access to the meaning

of what we think we have uncovered. Lather (2007:41) speaks of a 'crisis of representation' as researchers struggle to portray the meaning felt by the participants. Hence, there is a politics of interpretation in collecting, analysing and presenting data in which the researcher cannot present a whole or absolute truth, but can merely give testament to the lives of others (Lather, 2007:41) by interrupting and scrutinizing the normalizing effects of the power/knowledge of the dominant discourse (Lather, 2007:122).

Performance

As part of writing up the data I wrote a 4-act play entitled *Saying the Unsaid*, which is meant to be performed. The term "performance" can mean many things: companies perform according to certain organisational, financial, environmental or health/safety criteria; workers perform their duties; children perform in a school play, and so on. WHS activity could also be a type of performance; it is measured and evaluated and is usually normative in that it sets up an ideal or best practice model by which to measure and judge. For example, achieving the right number of safety observations cards, reducing the lost time injury frequency rate to a certain number, achieving a certain number of lost time injury free days, documented WHS management systems, wearing the correct personal protective equipment, and so on. As the cartoon mentioned earlier portrays, people are conditioned from their earliest years to perform to normative values by participation in the family of origin, their years of schooling, and workplace socialisation. Certain expectations are monitored and reinforced by reward or punishment. The management of WHS can be seen within this process, and subjectivities are constituted in relation to these parameters.

It might be useful here to introduce Butler's (2006) use of the term 'performative' as distinct from performance. Even though she is talking about learning how to perform gender, I think the same principles apply to learning how to perform an WHS subjectivity. She describes identity as 'tenuously constructed in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts' (Butler, 2006:61). Identity is a 'performative accomplishment' (Butler, 2006:61) which the person, and their audience 'come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief' (Butler, 2006:61). Using this kind of thinking, WHS subjectivities are called into being through the stylized repetition of acts over time. WHS activity is a performative art in which workers repeatedly sign this, sign that, wear this and not that, observe these, submit those, report that, record these and so on. These performances are not necessary in an absolute or objective sense, nor are they fixed or immanently permanent, but rely for their efficacy on repetition – doing the same things over and over to reinforce their legitimacy. My thesis is that if we can understand this process, these performances, name these acts and understand their arbitrary, non-essential, discontinuous and indeterminate nature, we may be able to interrupt them (Atkins, 2005:255) and imagine a 'different sort of repeating' (Butler, 2006:61). This will allow us to develop interventions that offer a map for a healthier and safer future in our workplaces. It is in this indeterminacy that Butler locates the possibility of agency as resistance by 'subverting the resignification of the norm in its repetition' (Atkins, 2005:255). This resistance is not violent, although it may disrupt because it may challenge such things as management prerogative and the hegemony of costs and production as more important than safety. This resistance is more subtle in that it uses established channels for relations between management and workers, which have been shown as effective in improving health and safety (Walters and Nichols, 2007:26). It merely uses these channels assertively and effectively once they have been identified.

Of course, it is not straightforward to accomplish trying to change acts of people that reinforce and are the result of 'hegemonic structures' (Butler, 2006:66). The field of WHS is fraught with contestations, it

is at the hub of many competing pressures. Workers cannot make choices in a free and simple agentic manner because they are caught in these webs of contradiction. The challenge for me in this research, and as an WHS trainer, is to identify where the possibilities of agency are for these workers.

Performance has had a 'troubled life' (Jackson, 2006:78) in academic circles as the 'textualist paradigm' (Bowman and Bowman, 2006:218) often relegates performance to an alternative or experimental genre of research reportage (Saldana, 2008:203). I wish to clarify that I do not pit performance against text as a binary pair, but rather understand performance as a complement and supplement (Conquergood, 2006:362) to the purely textual approach, that provides another lens through which to 'interrogate, document, and theorize cultural production' (Schutzman, 2006:278). This 'hegemony of textualism' (Hamera and Conquergood, 2006:421) is also reified in WHS discourse through the incredibly strong focus on the written word over the spoken word or the embodied actions of people, evidenced through the massive amounts of paperwork generated. This paperwork is powerful, symbolic and spawned and reinforced by the perceived need to prove fulfillment of duty of care. Such symbolic representations are part of a 'visibility politics' (Hamera and Conquergood, 2006:421) that believes representations are 'real truths guarded and championed accordingly' (Hamera and Conquergood, 2006:421). However, in WHS not everyone actually believes in the intrinsic value of these reifications but they perform them because they discern few alternatives and submit to their power.

I call this presentation of my results in the form of a play "performance ethnography". The dialogue of the play is developed as a montage using the traditional qualitative strategy of coding and analysing for themes, followed by the presentation of data in categorical forms (Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer, 2008:213) that give flesh (Jones, 2006:339) to the thick description (Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer, 2008:214). It is literally the staged re-enactment of ethnographically derived notes (Alexander, 2008:75). The written script, including the stage directions and props, consists of dramatized selections of narrative collected through interviews, participant observations, field notes, journal entries and artefacts (Saldana, 2008:196). Simply put, it is 'dramatizing the data' (Saldana, 2008:196).

Using performance can add richness to the data by evoking the 'texture and complexity' (Brearley and Darso, 2008:639) of the WHS experiences of the research participants. Ethnography through a performance lens is particularly suited to unveil the often 'hidden and convoluted process of power, discourse and materiality' (Madison, 2006:347). Performance can demonstrate the 'embodied, contested notions of culture' (Hamera, 2006:57) to illuminate the macro and micro politics involved in these contestations (Hamera, 2006:57). The classifying and calculating of data into tables does not readily capture the trajectories of how these categories develop in the workplace. The ability of performance to enliven contestations of meaning and open up 'received categories' (Conquergood, 2006:362) gestures to the anti essentialism of poststructuralist theories which underpin my conceptual framework (Langellier and Peterson, 2006:153). I believe it enhances the authenticity of my data presentation results because it captures the words of participants, their embodied actions, their emotions/affects, their desires, what is meaningful for them, and issues of power in a simulated but believable workplace.

A strength of using performance is that it is an embodied reenactment of embodied responses to WHS discourse. WHS is about bodies, about maintaining and protecting the integrity of bodies. Performance ethnography has a faith in the body as a site of knowledge which is used as a methodological tool (Pelias, 2008:185). It relies on the idea that bodies harbour knowledge about culture, and performance facilitates the exchange of this knowledge (Jones, 2006:339). The gestures, movements and actions of the actors help to provide a sense of the cultural experiences of the workers portrayed (Alexander,

2008:80). I now present some excerpts from this play. The first piece is set in a training room and exposes voices that are usually never heard:

> T: Good morning everyone, welcome along to this OHS course. I hope you enjoy the day.
>
> P1: (thinking aloud) Yeah, right – a boring waste of time.
>
> P2: (thinking aloud) Who is this person anyway? They wouldn't have a clue about what it's like at my workplace
>
> T: Today we'll look at OHS legislation,
>
> P1: (thinking aloud) All driven by insurance companies to make profits!
>
> T: risk management,
>
> P2: (thinking aloud) What's the point, they won't fix it anyway.
>
> P3: (thinking aloud) more paperwork
>
> T: and consultation.
>
> P1: (thinking aloud) If you speak up at my workplace you're branded as a trouble maker and they make it hard for you.

In this next extract workers situate their health and safety as subordinate to costs and production:

> P1: The noise from the line marking machine – it screams and will make you deaf…….
>
> T: What about redesigning the machine to isolate you from the noise or so it doesn't make that noise?
>
> P1: Way too expensive, and besides, it'll mean that we're off the road for weeks.
>
> P2: I bet if that noise was in their office they'd fix it. They wouldn't put up with it for five minutes.
>
> P1: Look, I really don't think there is anything that can be done about it. What can you do?
>
> T: (looking perplexed and trying hard to find a solution) Surely, there's something…… Have you at least reported it? Do you fill out a near miss every time you take the ear muffs off?
>
> P1: Are you crazy? If I do that they'll find a way to get rid of me.

A politics of hope was developed to try to model a positive way forward:

> Chris: Yeah, and I reckon that if we used the book trolley all the time there'd be no way that we could keep our schedule of having to get away all the books that are brought in each day. We wouldn't be able to get all the books on the shelves that we need to. So that's why I stopped using it because I could see I was falling behind.
>
> Rob. Oh, ok, so...it is good for stopping the manual handling injuries but it slows down the work a bit?
>
> Chris: Yep, that's about it.
>
> Rob: Well look. What if we make a deal? What if I say, I don't mind if it slows down the work, if you don't get all the books put away each day, and we'll work out something else about that. But if you use it, so you don't have to carry the books by hand – you know, you'd be carrying a couple of tonnes of books a week, Chris, when you think about it.

Chris: Yeah, I suppose I would be, mmmm.

Rob: So, are you willing to try that for say a week or something? And, if we're falling behind, don't worry I'm not going to go mad on you or anything like that; if we're falling behind let me know and we'll talk about maybe there's something else we need to do. Got a deal?

Chris: Yeah, I reckon I'm okay with that.

Rob: (said with optimism) Okay, that's great Chris. Let's see how we go then

So, performance ethnography makes many claims extolling its virtues. But, can they be substantiated? Well, I have performed the play five times now, twice at two different safety conferences, once at an international education conference, once at a university residential school for post graduate students in education, and once at a meeting of about 20 WHS professionals. Audiences have comprised WHS professionals, academics, all levels of workers, government representatives and university research students. The style of performance I have used in each of these presentations is called readers' theatre (Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer, 2008, 1995), a staged presentation in which the actors hold and read from scripts during the performance, staging and scenery is simple, with props used sparingly (Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer, 2008:213). I conscript impromptu volunteer actors from the audience who join me on stage, with no time for rehearsals. I distribute to the actors basic props such as hard hat, high visibility vest, clipboard, hearing protectors, safety glasses and some safety tape. This spontaneity mirrors how much of my data has been gathered by listening to stories – research participants have often performed their stories impromptu using their own role plays, becoming very agitated, expressive, passionate, caring and concerned.

Is it useful?

As mentioned in the introduction, educational research aims to uncover new information that can be used to enhance people's learning; for me, I want my research to have a utilitarian component. This is a yardstick by which I can assess whether my understanding and representation of the data is useful, relevant and believable. After performing the poem and play I received many supportive and/or thoughtful comments from audience members and actor-performers. For example, I won the People's Choice Award for the poem in the Three Minute Thesis Competition held at the Safety Institute of Australia's Conference in Melbourne in 2010. The following are a small selection of comments after people witnessed or participated in the play:

'The best and most real presentation I have been to at this conference' (from a senior international WHS coordinator, based in Geneva)

'We need to integrate role play into our teaching of WHS' (Senior research scientist from the United States of America).

Several WHS academics commented on its impact, how it helped to open their eyes/minds to the concerns of people at workplaces, and how it realistically portrayed the impact of power on WHS performance, adding that power has so far been undertheorised as an influence on WHS management. Some other comments related directly to its pedagogical effectiveness:

'I think in a training environment this would be well received….very enjoyable' (International WHS academic and researcher).

'It is likely that role playing is one of the most effective ways to communicate and teach these competencies and skills for communicating and coping with employers and co-workers

to correct unsafe conditions and to promote good WHS practices' (Matt Gillen, senior WHS research scientist).

One volunteer actor referred to her connecting to a sense of embodiment by reading her part:

> 'Being in that role certainly put me 'in the zone' of experiencing first hand a very foreign scenario. It reminded me of when I had a serious back injury... no one really knew what I was going through, and if people saw me managing ok there were these layers of 'well how serious is the problem really'? The play brought to light an embodiment of what it's like for workers, the workplace culture and the complexities of what it means to undertake and face WHS issues'.

It seems that performing the data in an embodied reenactment of the interactions people participate in at workplaces disrupts enough to challenge people's understanding of how to move forward, and opens up possibilities for them.

Finally, it must be said that this research process is not just academic and cognitive, but it has an emotional, affective and spiritual effect on the researcher. How I dealt with that and represented it was firstly through reflection and ownership, and then admitting that yes this had a personal impact on me, as a person, as it was a continuation of developing my ontology and epistemology; I turned this thinking into a poem that helped me represent this to myself and to the world (if they want to hear it), what it was like for me to have done this research. This poem captured feelings more than the cognitive information; by allowing this focus in this representation I am not saying that the cognitive is not important, but that there is more than the cognitive, and this more is often overlooked, excluded, and/or marginalised. It forced me to reflect on the process:

> How does my pursuit make the world a better place?
>
> Does anyone care about what I have to say?
>
> Do I have anything to say?
>
> I'm still not so sure
>
> for I still try to find my voice.
>
>
> Let the practitioners be my sounding board,
>
> In the end that's the test.
>
> I am yet to try them out to any great degree
>
> 'cause I'm still not sure what it's best to say.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the development of an eclectic methodology that enabled power, influence, symbolism, emotions and social interactions to be given prominence in a research project. Firstly researcher ontology and epistemology was discussed and shown to influence the research process. A post structural paradigm with Foucauldian influences allowed me to probe into the hidden world of meaning that underpinned the research participants' stories. A post modern emergent methodology allowed for a politics of hope to be developed that could chart an optimistic way forward

by identifying the possibilities for creating the new. Finally, I demonstrated that creative modes of representation such as poetry, cartoon, and drama offer viable mediums for presenting the data so as to elicit an embodied response from audiences to the embodied problem of how to improve worker health and safety. It was suggested that these ways of presenting data resonate with people's experiences in a way that is believable and may help them create within themselves a map of how to enhance their own health and safety.

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