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# Constructing the safe workplace: the dance of subjectivity, power and agency in the performance of OHS

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## Contents

Certificate of Authorship and Originality .....	viii
Acknowledgements .....	ix
Glossary .....	x
Abstract .....	xi
Chapter 1. Introductions.....	13
Introduction.....	13
<i>What can you do!</i> .....	16
What is OHS?.....	18
Significance of the problem.....	19
Why bother? .....	20
Researcher as subject.....	21
The eye of the beholder .....	21
Understanding my researcher subjectivity .....	25
Early years of life.....	26
Disintegration.....	26
Rebuilding subjectivity .....	27
Reflexively consolidate .....	28
Theoretical Framework.....	30
Key terms and concepts .....	31
Language and meaning .....	31
Subjectivity.....	33
Discourse and Truth .....	35
Power/knowledge.....	37
Deconstruction.....	40

Governmentality .....	41
Research question(s) .....	43
What to expect in this thesis .....	44
Chapter 2. Setting the Scene .....	48
Introduction.....	48
How did we get here?.....	49
The last 200 years .....	54
Cartoon 1. OHS as Dressage .....	59
Now and into the future: what hope for change? .....	70
Conclusion.....	79
Chapter 3 Methodology.....	80
Introduction.....	80
Can a white fella breathe country? .....	80
Researcher epistemology.....	85
Research Methodology .....	86
Methods .....	92
Data production .....	92
OHS courses .....	96
Interviews.....	100
Textual review.....	104
Data analysis .....	104
Ethics .....	106
Conclusion.....	107
Chapter 4 Exploring some themes.....	108

Introduction.....	108
OHS courses .....	108
Questionnaires .....	111
Written data .....	111
OHS courses .....	113
Table 1. What safe things do employees do at your workplace? .....	113
Table 2. What unsafe things do employees do at your workplace? .....	114
Table 3. Why do employees do unsafe things? .....	114
Table 4. How will the information from this course help to make your workplace safer? .....	117
Table 5. What are the challenges you see in implementing this information at work? .....	118
Table 6. What would make it easier to implement at work? .....	121
Table 7. Any other comments about making the workplace safer? .....	122
Sydney Safety Conference .....	123
Table 8. What is an effective OHS worker? .....	124
Table 9. What contributes to making people effective OHS workers? .....	127
Conclusion.....	128
Chapter 5. People's Stories .....	130
Introduction.....	130
Safety observations training .....	131
Listening to stories .....	137
Peter's story .....	138

Truth games .....	144
Merging themes.....	145
Conclusion.....	146
Chapter 6. On Becoming an OHS Subject .....	149
Introduction.....	149
The interview .....	149
Enter OHS .....	153
Many uses .....	153
Layers of power .....	158
Cost versus investment .....	163
Reporting .....	165
Liability and paperwork, or health and safety? .....	172
OHS Consultation.....	177
A politics of hope .....	187
Workplace Structures .....	187
Care, trust and relationships .....	189
Conclusion.....	199
Chapter 7. Saying the Unsaid .....	201
Introduction.....	201
Performance.....	202
Saying the Unsaid: a four act play .....	209
Act 1. Training introductions .....	210
Act 2. Risk management .....	213

Act 3. Back at the ranch, or, what it's like back at work for the new committee .....	215
Scene 1. The importance of small things .....	215
Act 3, Scene 2. New committee doing a site safety inspection on a construction site.....	216
Act 4. A Politics of Hope: Safety leadership .....	217
Scene 1. In the Library .....	217
Act 4 Scene 2: Manufacturing Lock out – tag out Behavioural Observations Program.....	220
Chapter conclusion.....	224
Chapter 8. Subjectivity, Agency and Power: The dance of OHS performance.	225
Introduction.....	225
OHS Subjectivity .....	226
OHS Agency.....	229
Speaking Subjects.....	234
Learning Agency .....	236
Trust .....	238
How does my research contribute to scholarship? .....	243
Recommendations for OHS practice .....	245
Knowledge and skills .....	247
Opportunity .....	247
Desire .....	248
Future Research.....	249
Conclusion.....	250

Coda: <i>Swansong PhD Poem</i> .....	253
References .....	255
Appendix A. Written questionnaire .....	278
Appendix B. Conference discussion exercises 1 and 2 .....	279
Appendix C. Participant Information Pack .....	281
Appendix D. Safety Observations Questionnaire .....	285
Appendix E. Interview participants .....	286

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Signature of candidate: .....



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## **Glossary**

CSO's	Customer Service Officers
HRM	Human Resource Management
HSE	Health, Safety and Environment
ILO	International Labour Organization
JSA	Job Safety Analysis (documented safe work procedure)
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
Near Miss/hit	An incident that could have resulted in an injury but did not, more by good luck than good planning or management
OHS	Occupational health and safety
OHS representative (rep)	A person elected to represent a certain group of workers to facilitate consultation with the employer
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SWMS	Safe work method statement (documented safe work procedure)
Tool box talks	Staff meetings, often held in the actual workplace rather than in a meeting room
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization

## **Abstract**

Previous research has demonstrated that working safely is often problematic and is subject to many competing pressures that workers must navigate. People want to be safe at work but they often prioritise other workplace imperatives over their own health and safety. The research described in this thesis focused on the relationships between power, subjectivity and agency in learning to work safely.

The purpose of this study was to understand how workers learn to become effective OHS subjects by examining how they come to constitute themselves in relation to OHS. To achieve this, an interpretive, hermeneutic framework within poststructural theories of subject formation was used as a basis for the research methodology. It is influenced by Foucauldian and poststructural understandings of language, meaning, subjectivity, discourse and truth, and power/knowledge. Qualitative ethnographic methods were used for data collection such as interviews, participant observations, open ended questionnaires, field notes, document analysis and researcher reflections. A large portion of the data was produced through people's stories as they tried to make sense of their OHS experiences. Data analysis was informed by the poststructural concept of agency in which people are not freely agentic but think and act within the range of choices offered by particular discourses.

The language used in speaking OHS into existence is couched in a vocabulary of compliance and conflict and workers often situate themselves within oppositional binaries. It became clear from the data that OHS subjectivity is constituted within competing pressures, and that individual agency is constrained by discourses that often privilege costs and production over worker health and safety, which are deeply embedded in the power relations at work. Workers often do not speak up about their health and safety concerns because of these power relations that threaten them with perceived negative consequences.

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. It was suggested that learning to constitute proactive agentic OHS subjectivities is more likely in workplaces that ensure workers have adequate OHS knowledge and skills, provide ample opportunity to use this knowledge/skills, and kindle their desire to do so. Success is enhanced in workplaces where all the actors and stakeholders are acutely and reflexively aware of how power operates in all its micro locations.

# Chapter 1. Introductions

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## Introduction

This research and thesis began as a search for understanding; for many years I have worked as an occupational health and safety (OHS) professional, conducting training courses and consulting to industry. Many times I have heard heartfelt stories of how workers wrestle with OHS at their workplaces and the dilemmas they face when seeking to have helpful OHS systems and practices introduced and/or implemented. Many struggle, they rant and they rail. They tell me that it's not that simple – they find themselves as just one stakeholder within a field of competing pressures of power and influence. OHS outcomes are often compromised as these forces vie for attention.

Much of the language of these efforts is couched in the binary of 'us versus them'. I myself became caught up in this, and often aligned myself with one side or the other of the debate. Gradually I have come to realise that this divide is arbitrary and unreal, and does not provide a useful framework within which to develop solutions.

As a trainer and consultant in the field of OHS I notice several conundrums with which many people struggle. The first and foremost of these is the often stated dislike of OHS discourse because it is perceived as an external imposition with mainly negative implications; for example, it slows you down, it costs too much and so on. This means that many people see it more as a restriction and a threat rather than as a strength and an opportunity. This perception results in the situation that people often have little or no intrinsic motivation to embrace OHS discourse, but view it as imposed duties that curtail their freedom and autonomy. This then creates and feeds into a cycle of rules and enforcement to conduct conduct; OHS is relegated to a low-level unimportant and marginal status that must be complied with when those with power and authority insist.

However, I began to notice in my training courses that when people were given the opportunity to explore their perceptions, they revealed that they did not want work to injure them and they gradually came to see the potential that OHS had

to offer, although the realising of this potential is a problem because of the power structures that suffuse workplaces. In a capitalist economy, people work for money, money flow is created through production of outputs, and OHS is often considered as constraining outputs. An interesting scenario was being set up – people instinctively liked and valued the idea of having safe workplaces, but could see no acceptable and navigable pathway to its achievement. Their negative sentiments had blinded them to the part of OHS legislation that gave them a legitimate voice, the part of the legislation that mandated employers consult with employees about any decisions that may affect their health and safety. The chance for meaningful consultation was often rejected as either impossible or improbable, again, because the power structures give employees limited legitimate access to decision making.

Workers were developing an OHS subjectivity, or a set of attitudes, perceptions, actions and behaviours in relation to OHS, but this subjectivity was more in reaction to rules and surveillance than a proactive approach aimed at improving health and safety. They felt they had little possibility of exerting effective agency in improving their own health and safety because they felt powerless to do so. Subjectivity, agency and power intersect at both the individual and group level in OHS discourse.

As we (my students and myself) picked this apart further and with my guidance, we explored what avenues might exist for agentic action. We firstly described their legislated and statutory mandate and then uncovered opportunities within their workplaces such as various workplace policies and procedures, that offered space and possibility. Once these places were identified, we set about developing the skills to successfully operate in and navigate those often foreign spaces. They were foreign because they required a different kind of person, they required a speaking, assertive, confident and optimistic person rather than an acquiescent person who knows that there is no point in seeking change.

What amazed, exhilarated and motivated me was that many of these people, by the end of the course, thanked me for helping them find a way to move forward, of helping them see that OHS discourse does offer potential and does offer opportunities to improve their health, safety and wellbeing. They often left the

class with action plans formulated within and by themselves as a result of our discussions. I would even hear back, months or years later, of their successes and their failures, and the mixture of the two. These experiences encouraged me to take on this research. As a trainer and to a lesser extent as a consultant, I could, in my own small way, influence people one at a time. The fact that I could achieve this made me try to deconstruct what I was doing and look for and understand the principles and processes at work that contributed to my success so that I could spread the word, so to speak, as I am want to do as an educator. To achieve this I needed to conduct in depth research, such as that offered by a PhD.

This thesis describes what I have achieved and the processes I have used to achieve it - it documents some of my wanderings and wonderings. These have no locatable beginnings nor are they at an end. This wandering and wondering is neither linear nor cyclically spiraling into a more truthful core, but more rhizomatic as I seek to make sense of what began as random, if not similar, stories. In this introductory chapter I offer you, the reader, 'a sketch of the terrain' (Linnell, 2006:3) of this thesis. I invite you to accompany me, to explore some of the known and unknown. I will have achieved what I set out to do if I disrupt your certainties, challenge your myths and cause you to (re)consider. It will be through this cognitive, affective and somatic interruption that we may challenge hegemonic and unproblematised authoritativeness about what is true and whose truth is heard.

I firstly introduce and describe the concept of *occupational health and safety*, and explain its importance in helping to make the world a better place; I then address my role of researcher and the biases I bring to the project. Following this I preview the main theoretical ideas that provide various lenses that have informed my research, which has been heavily influenced by Foucault and post-structuralism. I do not claim to be either a post-structuralist or a Foucauldian scholar, but I acknowledge that these philosophical approaches offer to me very useful frameworks for viewing the world. I then suggest that there is a gap in OHS research, a gap produced by disallowing subjects a voice and by pretending that systems are independent of people. This space opened by the

gap suggests a place of possibilities, a place where people listen and are heard, where we all embrace the fullness of our humanity and work together for a better future, a future in which the world of work does not only NOT injure our mind, body or spirit, but a place bristling with the potential of the workplace being startlingly proactive for our health and wellbeing.

This chapter then introduces the purpose of my particular research project, and follows this with the research questions that constitute this thesis, and provides a brief description of the methodology I used; both of these topics are expanded further in subsequent chapters. Finally I provide a concise map of what you can expect to find as this document unfolds – a plan of the thesis and an outline of the chapters.

The end of the thesis is not the end of the work. My understanding is always a process. The people I regularly meet through my work help me realise the contingent nature of good health and safety outcomes; and sometimes (or should I say, very often) they accept compromised health and safety consequences in favour of other priorities.

I now present a poem that I wrote titled ‘What can you do!’, in an effort to capture the conundrums people face in workplaces in regard to OHS. The poem also documents my struggles in deciding on this research project, and begins to hint at my part in the research. I performed this poem in a “Three Minute Thesis” competition at the Melbourne Safety in Action Conference 2010 and won the “People’s Choice” category.

### *What can you do!*

*A poem by Phil Wadick*

*To research or not to research, that is the question.*

*What is research anyway?*

*Well, I am very inquisitive,*

*I’ll give you that.*

*I love asking questions to find out what’s going on.*



*But, how to research without colonising for my own pursuits?*

*What are the ethics of this gaze?*

*OK, I'll turn my questions into research,*

*I'll gaze, inquire and report.*

*Does it pay, you say (or I say)?*

*Well, not much – but I don't starve, although I won't be rich*

*Is it worthwhile? You know, make the world a better place*

*Better place for whom, you ask, ....or do I?*

*Perhaps it might help someone, someplace, someday, somehow.*

*What then should I research?*

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

*All those people who struggle and rail,*

*Rail against.....,*

*Against.....,*

*Against?*

*There's nothing tangible to rail against....*

*It fritters away in silent tears, hides the fears.*

*There's no one can answer, we all defer, flick it about.*

*It's bigger than us all,*

*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!***

## **What is OHS?**

WorkCover NSW states that 'Occupational health and safety refers to the legislation, policies, procedures and activities that aim to protect the health, safety and wellbeing of all people at the workplace' (Mladenovic-McAlpine, 2008:56). However, a clear definition of OHS is not to be found in any Australian legislation, but must be inferred through the objects of the OHS Acts and the duties of employers and employees. For example, the first two stated objectives of the NSW OHS Act (2000) are: '(a) to secure and promote the health, safety and welfare of people at work, (b) to protect people at work against risks to health or safety arising out of the activities of persons at work' (NSW Government, 2000: section 3). Similarly, the Victorian OHS Act 2004 imposes a duty on the employer 'so far as is reasonably practicable to provide and maintain for employees of the employer a working environment that is safe and without risks to health' (Victorian Government, 2004: section 21.1). The goal of OHS is to protect and promote the safety and health of workers by preventing and controlling occupational diseases and accidents (CCH Australia, 2006: 11).

According to the United Nations (UN), World Health Organisation (WHO) and International Labor Organisation (ILO), 'every citizen of the world has a right to healthy and safe work' (WorkCover NSW, 2001: 1). The aim of OHS legislation, then, is to 'ensure the health, safety and welfare of individuals at the workplace while undertaking work activities' (WorkCover NSW, 2001:1).

### **Significance of the problem**

Work related injuries and disease affect individuals and communities across the world. The ILO estimates that each year about 2.3 million people die from work related accidents and diseases, including approximately 360,000 fatal accidents and an estimated 1.95 million fatal work-related diseases (ILO, 2009 (April)) while more than 337 million accidents caused more than 4 days off work (SafetyNet Journal, 2009: 2). In Australia, despite the difficulty of assembling statistics (ASCC, 2007: 4), preliminary data show that in 2006-07 there were 236 compensated fatalities, most of whom were males (ASCC, 2009a: viii), and 132,055 serious workers compensation claims (ASCC, 2009a: vii). A serious claim is one that results in a death, a permanent incapacity, or a temporary incapacity with an absence from work for one week or more (ASCC, 2009a: 85).

Kerr et al (1996), undertaking research funded by the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission (NOHSC), concluded that fatalities caused by disease far outnumbered those caused by accidents, yet were not included in official statistics. This is still true today. For example, 2 New Zealand studies have confirmed the numbers of workplace cancers have been massively underestimated, finding that while approximately 400 people a year die from work related cancers in New Zealand, fewer than 40 are recorded as resulting from the workplace (SafetyNet Journal, 2008). The total economic cost to the Australian economy for work-related injury and disease was estimated as \$57.5 billion for the 2005-06 financial year, or 5.9% of GDP (ASCC, 2009b: 2). Of this, 3% of the total cost is borne by the employers, 49% by the workers and 47% by the community (ASCC, 2009b: 2).

There have been significant improvements in OHS performance in recent years but considerable scope exists for further progress (NOHSC, 2002:1) despite efforts by governments to regulate the sector.

### **Why bother?**

The implementation of OHS in workplaces is still understood primarily from a structuralist or positivist paradigm and its management largely viewed as a technical and medical phenomenon (Shannon, Mayr, & Haines, 1997:217). That is, much safety discourse believes OHS will be improved by better engineering and workplace monitoring (Shannon, et al., 1997:217), involving improved equipment and processes, and telling workers what the rules are and expecting them to comply. It does not take into account emotions values, or attitudes; it fails to tell the stories of those people who are most affected – the workers, and it privileges official and technical knowledge over the local and personal knowledge of the workers (Wadick, 2005b: 107). It does not discuss how workers negotiate the changes required, and the personal local negotiations of power and influence that ensue. It is yet to consider the ‘emotional epiphany to....some transformation from an old self to a new one’ (Rhett, 1997 in Ellis & Bochner, 2003: 226). Traditional safety discourse is more concerned that people learn facts to guide their actions rather than the meanings that people put on these facts and the meanings they associate with their experience of their actual workplaces. Yet, OHS is more than a canonical or scientific story – it is also a story of feelings, emotions and desires.

The ‘technical rational’ (Ineson & Thom, 1985:105; Labisch, 1985:34; Senge, 1996; Williams, 1993:58) approach to managing OHS assumes that a business owner or manager could access legislation and then implement policies and procedures to ensure a safe and healthy workplace. However, this does not take into account the fact that there are many influences on OHS outcomes. For instance, the presence of a trade union tends to improve outcomes (Cumpston, 1992: 3; Dale, 1918; Follman, 1978: 20; Labisch, 1985: 36; Meacher, 1985; Reeves, 1988), management commitment improves outcomes (McKenna, 2006: 219-220), empowering workers improves outcomes (Johnstone, 2004: 25, 482); the effectiveness of OHS reps is not clear (Nichols, 1997: 208), and the

pressure of production tends to lead to negative OHS outcomes (Johnstone, 2004: 6; Nichols, 1997: 55). Employees and their health and safety reps now have significant rights such as to information, to be consulted, to undertake training, to conduct workplace inspections, and to refuse to perform dangerous work. However, employees need to be assertive in exercising these rights as success depends on how they can formulate and speak up for their views (Johnstone, 2004: 559).

## **Researcher as subject**

### **The eye of the beholder**

I have been struggling with how or why the historical development of my subjectivity needs to have a voice in this research. I am now beginning to understand. To put it bluntly, researcher objectivity is a myth (Markham, 2005: 802) or a 'chimera' (Guba & 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 & Lincoln, 2005b). 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. However, 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.

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.

Hence, throughout this paper I will attempt to clarify reflexively how I am at one and the same time, both the subject conducting this research, and, to an extent, an object of this research. I will attempt to be transparent (Silverman, 2005: 224) to show how my methods and my subjectivity and intersubjective relationships (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005: 218) influence the research process. This may improve the quality of the research as I problematise my motivations, my biases, and my reasons for decisions made.

I am motivated to do this research because in my role of OHS trainer and consultant I am constantly reminded of the lack of fit between OHS rhetoric and workers' experiences. I regularly hear people narrate personal stories that demonstrate that official OHS discourse does not always translate into safer workplaces. I now tell a story from my own consultancy experience which is relevant to this discussion. As part of my work I write up OHS management systems for builders and tradespeople in the construction industry, usually with some consultation with the client. I had recently finished writing a site safety management plan that was required as part of a tender, comprising 55 pages. I telephoned my client to let him know I would be emailing it to him so he could read it before he sent it to the tendering organisation. He replied *Why would I want to read that shit. I'll just send it straight to them.* It helped put me and my work in its place – as long as it got him the job, it did not really matter what it said and did not have to reflect everything that he would do on the job. This is not very good for me thinking that I have a useful job that is good for the world by helping to improve health and safety of workers! These types of comments that I regularly hear about OHS have been one of the motivators for me undertaking this research. I need to make this bias clear because it is an important part of the lens through which I understand the stories told to me in this research project and must influence what I consider is important and what I discard. I am a practical person and want effort to produce practical outcomes. I become frustrated and de-motivated when I see a great deal of effort

squandered on paperwork that mainly sits on a shelf and is only opened if there is a need to protect oneself from liability.

Many times I have agonised over my role as trainer, and especially as an OHS consultation trainer for members of health and safety committees. I have often been made to feel like a trade union person (and I am not), using my training courses to teach people about their rights and responsibilities as OHS subjects. Their right and responsibility to speak up and have an opinion, their right and responsibility to report hazards, their right and responsibility to refuse dangerous work. Management engages me to teach workers the skills that will help them enact OHS subjectivities, and, in management's eyes, this often means working safely and doing what they are told – that is, the 'safe person' (Cowley, 2006: 3) behaviour-centred approach that expects individual workers to strictly follow procedures and "be careful" despite hazards in their work environment. However (and almost unfailingly), when I open up the topic to discussion, workers problematise this concept. They constantly refer to power plays and hidden agendas in which "management" uses OHS to further disenfranchise them. Many workers, including managers, supervisors, shop floor employees and the self employed, have negative attitudes to OHS because it is often being used as a numbers game for key performance indicators (KPI's).

Consequently, the more I work in this field the more I realise that successful OHS outcomes rely on much more than complying with legislation. They rely on negotiations of power and interests among all the stakeholders. This process has largely been ignored in OHS literature, and I want to open it up for discussion: it needs to be uncovered, theorised, debated and given credibility if, as a society, we are to create civil workplaces based on everyone's right to a 'state of complete physical, mental and social well being' (Johnstone & Quinlan, 1993: 4). Perhaps, as Lather (2007:120) suggests, I can contribute to an 'unjamming effect' in relation to the closed truths steeped in the past and thereby free up the present for new forms of thought and practice.

In this section of the chapter I am writing about how my personal ontology and epistemology influence my researcher subjectivity, and how my agency as a researcher is constrained by my own view of the world. I can try to be as

objective and as impartial as I like, but I still influence the data. Although I say that I come from a post positivist theoretical perspective which presumes to not know the answer before the question, I am the filter that influences the data. I ask the questions, I steer the research along particular ways, I choose the participants, I analyse the data. All the while I am looking for something – could it be that I am looking for evidence of what I think is true? Let's face it, some evidence can be found to support almost any proposition, to lend credibility to almost any assertion. How then can my research be 'value free...[or]...value neutral', to use the words of Koro-Ljungberg et al (2007: 1076). By virtue of my gaze I am part of the normalizing technology of power that seeks to make workers occupational health and safety (OHS) subjects.

If I accept that I cannot but exert influence on the research, how best to navigate this influence? Even though I try to remain objective, can I really give an accurate account of the participant's position? As researcher I write about the world of the research participants, how they perceive it, what it means to them, their struggles and successes, how they feel, what they want. Is this enough? As a reflexive researcher, I must ask *Is this enough for me*, or, *Is this enough for them*? Whose agenda am I following? Is it my agenda that wants to change their lot for the better? Do they really want change, or are they happy to play their games of resistance which give them a semblance, or perception, of exerting power within their sphere of influence? I need to reflect on these questions if I am to fathom the truths of all those involved. Should my research make a difference? To whom should it make a difference? Will allowing the stories to be told actually help create a better world, at least for the storyteller? How do the stories influence the researcher? Should, as Denzin (2001: 23) argues, we, as researchers, engage in qualitative research 'as a form of radical democratic practice'? Because 'writing is not an innocent practice' (Denzin, 2001: 23), and interviewing is a 'meaning-making practice[s]' (Brinkerman, 2007:1119), especially 'epistemic interviews' (Brinkerman, 2007: 1119), designed to develop knowledge in the encounter, rather than purely eliciting narrative storylines and opinions.



Like Wagle and Cantaffa, I wish to examine my own identity because 'our research processes are necessarily entangled with our identities' (Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008: 136). Rather than pretend that my identity does not matter, rather than 'hide behind a false veil of neutrality and disembodiment' (Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008: 136), I wish to explore my identity to show how my research projects are necessarily embedded in my identity. Although this may seem narcissistic, in writing my research I try to avoid 'vanity ethnography' (Lather, 2007: 44) that would put me at the centre of the research. I try to be a reflexive researcher at all stages of the research process. At the planning stage I critically examine my own motivations; during data collection I try to remain aware of my biases that influence the routes that my questioning follows; during data analysis, by being aware of my prejudices I endeavour to allow themes to emerge, opening myself to new ideas, minority voices and evidence of non-normalising and non-totalising discourses.

### **Understanding my researcher subjectivity**

I now present a brief written account of the development of who I am now. This is only one account; it is not meant to be the real lived experience. It may be, as Foucault would have us believe, a work of fiction (Foucault, 2003g). However, for me, it is a meaningful work of fiction as it portrays certain aspects of the unfolding of a life, my life. It is based in my perceptions of my truth, and kindled by memories, feelings, and embodied emotions. The same story could be told many ways, but this version focuses on learning subjectivities. I compartmentalise distinct periods for ease of description. However, this belies the fact that the stages are not at all exclusive, but overlapping and concatenated, folding and unfolding within and without. There are no well defined cut off points, and changes to my subjectivity have almost always been accompanied by some kind of pain – physical and/or emotional. I do not always want to let go of who I am, I do not always want to reinvent myself; however, the more dissonance created, the more I must change to maintain some kind of balance.

## **Early years of life**

I grew up in a working class catholic family as the eldest of eight children. I had an older brother who died at 2 days old; I never knew him and I was the first surviving child. I suppose that I was precious and treated with as much love as my parents could give. Both my parents worked very hard to keep us housed, clothed, fed and schooled – mum at home and dad out at work.

Because dad was at work a lot I was called upon to help my mother – looking after little ones, shopping, organising and so on. I had a good, secure, happy childhood. My life was organised for me – I did not get the chance to think a lot for myself. I had many duties to perform, many responsibilities that kept me under pressure. And I was up to it. I became a responsible, hard working young person who did what I was told. When it came to choosing what to do once I had “grown up”, I did not have a clue. I followed my childhood strategy of doing what I was told, and became a school teacher. I hated it. I was nervous breakdown material and something had to give.

## **Disintegration**

Then came the unravelling, and it coincided with the ‘70’s in Australia of sex and drugs and rock ‘n roll. It was a time of resistance to the ‘system’ (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984a:4), during which time one could choose among many options, and I chose the one of ‘voluntarily dropping out’ (Henriques, et al., 1984a:6). I allowed myself to decondition, which was akin to a slow, 10 year long, nervous breakdown. Bit by bit, who I was became dismantled. I withdrew from the mainstream normalising and totalising influences and games of truth and kept company with people who resisted. My friends were drug addicts, alcoholics, derelicts, prostitutes, hippies – almost anyone who resisted what we were supposed to do and think. We were the marginalised, often invisible, and we had no voice; we were fringe dwellers who made “normal” people feel alternately comfortable, uncomfortable, superior and/or jealous.

I often felt that there was a big difference between myself and many of my accomplices – I was mostly living this life through a conscious choice to

decondition, to reinvent myself. Whereas, many people I knew saw very few alternatives: they were outcast and saw nowhere else to go. I could. I had a good education and good family of origin who loved and accepted me, and a confidence born of many little successes. This really came home to me late one night – I was out wandering the streets looking for food (the modern city hunter-gatherer living off the excesses and leftovers of our wealthy lifestyle); I was looking through a garbage bin outside a restaurant that was closed for the night (it's amazing what you can find), and I saw derelicts I knew also looking for food, and I was only playing a game – they weren't – they really needed the food. It hit me suddenly – I was taking their food in my game; where were my ethics? Where had my integrity gone? This event symbolises for me my lowest point in the unravelling of my subjectivity. If I went any further I would not be able to come back. It was time to rebuild.

### **Rebuilding subjectivity**

I think it is always hard to change one's own subject. The rebuilding of who I am is/was not easy. I was motivated through becoming a father. I had good role modelling for parenting and I wanted to be a good parent myself. I became attached to many aspects of my unravelled self – especially the freedom to do and the freedom from many external constraints. What I did not like was being an outcast, a social misfit. Unravelling was painful, rebuilding was painful. But they were also many other things – joyful, exciting, challenging, fulfilling. To succeed I needed to be motivated and supported, and if the motivation is strong enough, appropriate support will be found.

Rebuilding my subjectivity required me to rejoin the mainstream. I needed to reinvent myself, build a new identity that could function within the official discourse of neoliberal capitalism and consumerism. I needed to re-prioritise my values and beliefs and learn new knowledges – knowledges that could be commodified and traded.

In practical terms, I learned a trade and worked for a living in my own business to raise and support our family. Through reflective practice and critical reflection I constructed knowledge and then passed this on to apprentices, fostering their

need to construct their subjectivity and increase their agency. I moved from a marginalised person with limited agency to becoming a valued and respected member of our community by allowing myself to be subjected to and a subject of the persuasive and normalising forces of the rhizomatic power relations permeating social relations.

### **Reflexively consolidate**

By 44 years of age I was becoming physically worn out by the hard labour of construction work, and mentally deadened by the repetitive nature of my daily grind. Time to reinvent myself again. This time it was easier – I was not only motivated but I was strong, healthy, secure and confident. Still, it was not pain free as I embarked on post graduate studies; this change meant once again, I would lose the camaraderie of a familiar group of work mates, lose my respected identity which was a symbol of my rising from the realms of the marginalised.

Now I work as a specialist trainer and consultant in OHS for workplaces; the types of training I conduct are diverse: OHS Consultation, Inductions for the Construction industry, behaviour based safety, risk management, employee inductions and customized training. My clients are employers and employees from all different occupations, with all levels of knowledge, skills and attitudes to OHS. My personal mission is to improve health and safety at work through quality training, research and consultancy activities. In previous research I gathered evidence suggesting that many course participants view mandated safety training 'as a waste of time' (Wadick, 2006: 4), and I still regularly hear anecdotal stories of training being boring and expensive. Some safety advertising weighs into the debate with comments such as 'Safety presentations are an excellent chance for some people to catch up on a quick nap...[and] have a reputation for being boring' (safety training brochure, 2006). A popular TV series, *The Office*, depicts a safety induction as being a ridiculous presentation of common sense issues that demean the workers in attendance.

Yet, organisations place a lot of reliance on OHS training turning workers into 'risk aware' or 'mindful' (Hopkins, 2005) workers who can work with an

'intelligent awareness' (Abrahamsson & Somerville, 2007: 62) of what is going on around them. It is assumed that training in the training room will change individual behaviour at work, despite the lack of unequivocal evidence to support it. For example, the Industry Commission Inquiry into Occupational Health and Safety (Industry Commission, 1995: xxxii) found that very little research has been conducted into the effectiveness of OHS training and interventions. More recently, Glendon et al (2006: 12) state 'Only a small proportion of OHS interventions are systematically assessed and very few are comprehensively evaluated'. Martimo et al (2008) concluded from a review of published research literature that manual handling training does not prevent back injury. Somerville and Lloyd (2005) and Bernoth (2001) report on the limited success of training in the construction industry, mining, aged care and fire fighting, although Abrahamsson and Somerville (2007) come to see training as credible, offering the potential for change.

Where OHS training has been evaluated, 'most training interventions lead to positive effects on safety knowledge, adoption of safe work behaviours and practices, and safety and health outcomes' (Burke, et al., 2006: 315). It is often agreed by researchers that OHS training does improve safety knowledge and awareness and does lead to safer workplaces (Cohen & Colligan, 1998). However, quality training is only one of the factors in making workplaces safe: research by Nichols (1997: 55) demonstrates that despite training, accidents can happen when rules are breached in the cause of production. Business and management practices such as these contribute to the occurrence of work related injury and ill health because they can inhibit the adoption and implementation of health and safety recommendations (Cumpston, 1992: 200).

The philosophy of OHS training makes many assumptions, few of which have been properly theorised and/or problematised. It assumes that workers will change long held beliefs and attitudes that are part of their particular workplace/industry context and culture (Abrahamsson & Somerville, 2007: 53). It does not theorise how difficult it can be for this transformational type of learning to occur and the difficulties workers have in bringing these changes into the workplace when the workplace has not changed, when the culture has not

changed and when the priorities are still costs and production privileged over safety. Safety training is often geared at changing worker behaviour rather than the discourse that has spawned that behaviour (Somerville, 2005:18; Wadick, 2005a).

Therefore, training does not, by itself, unproblematically improve workplace health and safety outcomes: it is mediated by socio-cultural factors such as power relations, access to knowledge, decision making and resources. The original focus for my research was to be OHS training, but it broadened to take into account OHS discourse more generally, with training as one element. When I listened to peoples' stories they were not concerned so much about training, but about implementation of OHS in their workplaces; they struggled with and were perplexed by such competing pressures pushing and pulling OHS, such as costs, production, time, power, culture, peer pressure, identity, leadership and personality. Implementing OHS was not simply a matter of knowing what the rules are and then following them. It is so replete with tensions and agendas that it has become an enigma and a paradox. My efforts turned to making some sense of these lived contradictions and open them up to scrutiny. It is only by deconstructing them and making them apparent that they can be managed.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In this section of the paper I explore the key concepts of poststructuralism and demonstrate how they inform my understanding of the topic. Poststructural theory is a dominant influence on my theoretical framework and provides a lens for framing and analysing my research work. Poststructuralism is a name for a theory, or a group of theories, concerning the relationship between human beings, the world, and the practice of making and reproducing meanings (Belsey, 2002: 5). Although poststructural theory is plural and heterogeneous (Lather, 2007: 5; Weedon, 1997: 19) it offers many concepts that help me examine how people learn and how they integrate this learning in forging new identities. Poststructuralist theory is interested in meaning-making, power, social structure, discourse and the subject (Davies, 2006: 76; Weedon, 1997), which all provide a framework for meaningful understanding of OHS. Perhaps the most radical claim of poststructuralism is to reject the possibility of arriving at a "truth"

about the essence of a phenomenon (Sondergaard, 2002: 188). Poststructuralists reject the idea of a universal and objective knowledge delivered through the use of reason and argue that truths are always partial and knowledge is always situated in that it is produced by and for particular interests, in particular circumstances, at particular times (MacLure, 2003:174-5)

## **Key terms and concepts**

In the following sections I explore the poststructural concepts of language and meaning, subjectivity, discourse and truth, power/knowledge, and deconstruction. I also include a section explaining governmentality because it is a key notion explicated by Foucault that helps us understand how OHS discourse operates in workplaces.

## **Language and meaning**

For poststructuralist theory the common factor in analysis of social organisation, social meanings, power and subjectivity is *language* (Weedon, 1997: 21). Language, understood in the sense of all signifying systems, including images and symbols, gives us access to information (Belsey, 2002: 3). Language is representation of meaning, it is not the meaning itself; that is, rather than reflecting a pre-given social reality, language constitutes reality for us through representations (Lather, 2007: 103). In this way, language intervenes between humans and their world (Belsey, 2002: 6). Information from a person's environment is processed through 'pre-existing systems of knowledge' (McKenna, 2006: 228) such as their beliefs, theories and/or experiences which act as filters for meaning. Hence, language can be understood in terms of competing ways of giving meaning to the world. It is not transparent or a neutral medium or vehicle for providing access to the world or to thought (MacLure, 2003: 180). It therefore becomes a site of political struggle and is always open to challenge and redefinition (Weedon, 1997: 25).

For example, as a trainer, I might speak of 'safety', thinking that I know what it means. However, the qualities identified as 'safe' are not fixed immanently in the word, but are socially produced. I think of 'safety' as beneficial to workers, but they may associate negative things with it such as: it is an intrusion, an

obligation, a burden, a threat or a bureaucratic grab for money (Wadick, 2007: 147). They may be influenced by the tendency to use safety 'as a club with which to beat the other party over the head' (Dorman, 2000: 365).

The implications for OHS are many: how does the trainer allow for these multiple interpretations? What does the official OHS reliance on the written word mean for people who struggle with literacy but want to be safe? And how would these people frame their OHS interpretations as outsiders to written or codified knowledge? Each individual's understanding of OHS competes for the meaning of a plural 'signifier' (Weedon, 1997: 26) such as "safety", which implies either 'oh no, more rules', or 'how much will this cost/slow me down?', or, 'I look like an idiot in all this gear', or 'I love not having to risk my life any more'.

The language used to describe OHS becomes at the same time both the carrier and creator of subjects epistemological beliefs (Lather, 1991: 13). In previous research conducted by the author, 25% of answers to the question 'How did you learn to work safely?' cited 'common sense' (Wadick, 2005b:93), and six out of eleven subcontractors interviewed believed that safe working is a matter of common sense (Wadick, 2005b: 58-59). Workers who use the term generally mean knowledge acquired through their senses that is real and meaningful to them. When people identify that they have common sense they are positioning themselves within the rationalist, humanist world view that is the legacy of the Enlightenment (MacLure, 2003:174) as logical and rational, and that common sense knowledge is obvious, intuitive, objective and available to be understood and known by all in the same way. It is natural and normal. The workers in my research agreed that most people are born with the potential to develop their common sense, it improves with experience and some people have more than others (Wadick, 2005b: 59).

As an OHS professional I find it very interesting that many workers vehemently defend their common sense approach, but those very same people debate whether other people have as much common sense as them, and some people definitely have more. They do not explore the awkward paradox that if it is so obvious and widely available, why they have it and others do not. When they have been using their common sense to manage their health and safety, their



common sense has formed as embodied knowledge and constitutes who they are. This tacit type of knowledge that 'accrues to the sentient body in the course of its activity' (Zuboff, 1988:40) is inseparable from the subtle and complex skills from which workers derive pride and economic power (Zuboff, 1988:37-38). This common sense and embodied knowledge is an integral part of who they are, and is heavily related to their context and situation (Farrell, 2006:47). The language of common sense can constrain the development of deeper insights because it is trusted as a given fact. The term *common sense* then can become a site of struggle. It tends to become a fixed ideological position people adopt which renders their status quo as natural and normal (Weedon, 1997: 30) and OHS improvements/legislation as an unfair imposition with ulterior motives.

### **Subjectivity**

Weedon (1997:32) uses the term *subjectivity* to refer to the 'conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world'. Crowley and Himmelweit (1992 in Jones, 2005:88) add that subjectivity also refers to our ability to act in the world as intentional beings while at the same time be subject to forces beyond our conscious control. This double sense of the subject as both intentional and subject to forces allows for an individual who is both socially produced and multiply positioned 'neither determined nor free but both simultaneously' (Jones, 2005:89). It is at this junction that subjects struggle for agency and this is a concept further explored throughout this thesis.

The concept of the subject espoused by poststructuralism moves away from the humanist supposition of the self as a unitary being (Pile & Thrift, 1995a: 1), or singular identity (Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2006: 53) possessing an 'unchanging core' (Etelapelto & Saarinen, 2006: 160), to a more dynamic notion that views the self as multiple and fractured (Ogborn, 1995: 75), and some say 'fragmented' (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999: 357), constantly created and recreated through a continuous process of negotiation with one's context (Etelapelto & Saarinen, 2006: 160). This assumes that subjectivity is 'formed and constituted' (Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2006: 53) through the interweaving of many heterogeneous experiences (Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2006: 53); it is

not innate, not genetically determined, but socially produced. It is produced in a whole range of discursive practices – economic, social and political (Weedon, 1997: 21).

The subject is embodied and ‘composed of and by a federation of different discourses/persona, united and orchestrated to a greater or lesser extent by narrative’ (Pile & Thrift, 1995a: 11). Every day, people enact whatever subjectivity is required of them in particular contexts (Pile & Thrift, 1995b: 49) as they adopt their multiple positionings (Walkerdine, 1995: 325). People juggle these multiplicities which are organised in a ‘salience hierarchy’ (MacMillan, 2007: 14) that reflects the level of commitment to the different roles. Individual subjects rank their various selves according to which role they need to perform in any particular occasion, similar to T.S. Elliott’s poem ‘The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock’ in which Alfred entreats his friend ‘To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet’. In OHS, the salience we attach to our identities influences how much effort we put into each role. Subjects can be at one and the same time a father/mother, son/daughter, worker, employee, manager, OHS rep, shy, volunteer, and so on, and they invoke which one(s) they will perform depending on their perceptions of the demands of the occasion. People are thinking, desiring and intentional. They choose to disobey or obey, they resist or comply, they make changes and they can try to make a difference (Jones, 2005:88).

Subjectivity is a complex, ambivalent and unfinished process: the subject is continually *becoming*. It is not a linear process but fluid (Davies, 2006: 80), fraught with contradictions and alliances between variable narrative positions (Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2006: 53). Tamboukou and Ball (2006: 253) use the phrases ‘nomadic subjects’ and ‘nomadism’ to describe the constant process of subjects remaking and invoking their multiple identities, and this nomadism is rhizomatic rather than arboreal, marked by multiple connections, with false starts, new beginnings, hiatuses and interruptions (Tamboukou & Ball, 2006: 255).

Work is a key site in the formation of persons, or their subjectivities (Miller & Rose, 2008:174). In this research I use the term ‘OHS subjectivity’ to describe the positions people adopt in regard to health and safety at work– their values,

attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. This is always influenced by the practices of the particular workplace. Codified (documented) requirements such as legislation, policies and procedures compete with everyday practices, and workers are caught in this tension. For example, at a large manufacturing client of the author's, employees regularly work short staffed, so they cut corners to maintain production. This is accepted by frontline supervisors and these actual work practices have become 'normalized' (Rabinow, 1986: 20) even though workers know full well it increases their risks of injury and is contrary to official policy that has the hollow refrain of *safety first, production second*. Subjects learn that OHS is subservient to production – it is a nexus between two discourses which is the fundamental tension which always must be negotiated. Perhaps this is the crux of it all – the production of OHS subjects within this nexus of power relations (Fendler, 1998:39) mediated by historical and economic structures (Gilroy, 1996: 41).

### **Discourse and Truth**

People in contemporary western societies think of themselves as individuals, in charge of their own lives and thoughts, who make their own meanings of the world, and are capable of objective reflection to make sense of their experiences (Danaher, Schirato, & Webb, 2000:30). Poststructuralism rejects this idea of the independent self-governing subject (Danaher, et al., 2000:31) and theorises that our thoughts and actions are heavily influenced by the particular discourses in which we circulate. In the words of Edwards and Nicoll (2006:185)

*Discourse is a term for the historically specific and contingent ways in which talk about an object or field of objects emerges and the practices that sustain this talk.*

In this sense, discourses are ways of constituting knowledge, and they include social practices, forms of permitted subjectivity, and the power relations inherent in them (Weedon, 1997: 105). I think of them as spheres of influence and control, which limit and permit what we can think, how we can act and what we can perceive as true.

These 'regimes of practices' (Foucault, 1978: 248) are described as 'games of truth' by Foucault (1984: 36), which are a 'set of rules by which truth is

produced' (Foucault, 1984: 36). As in the previous section on language, meaning does not pre-exist representation, and discourses define what meaning to apply to each representation. Discourses found, justify and provide reasons for ways of doing things, and what is defined as true or false is contingent on the needs of those in power (Foucault, 1978: 252). Hence, the humanist concept of the self-knowing individual subject in control of their thoughts is brought into question because those thoughts are the ones the subject is allowed to think by the discourses within which s/he moves and speaks.

Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the body, the mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (Weedon, 1997: 105). Neither the body, nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside of the discursive articulation and are always part of a wider network of power relations (Weedon, 1997: 105). For example, the way individual's bodies are constituted to be 'docile' (Foucault, 1986c: 180), used and abused in the service of work is a discourse that permits and encourages bodies to be sacrificed for economic gain of a few and is reinforced by the hegemonic common sense that says it is okay to risk oneself for someone else's profit.

The most powerful discourses in society have firm institutional bases such as law (Danaher, et al., 2000:36-37; Weedon, 1997: 105). OHS can be seen to have its institutional base firmly established in law, which itself is contingent and under constant challenge from such diverse groups as trade unions, safety professionals, employers, and even governments; hence, discourses are rarely stable or unitary as they are contested and overlapping. OHS discourse is a relatively new phenomenon historically and its knowledge and truths are still being negotiated (although all truths are subject to certain amounts of negotiation, but truth becomes sedimented in more established discourses and harder to shift), which means that workers have available to them, at least potentially, the opportunity to choose the means to resist or embrace various subject positions. Abrahamsson and Somerville (2007) found that in mining workplaces, new safety legislation opened up possibilities for changes in worker subjectivities by introducing contradictions into the OHS discourses at the mine

sites. For example, the right to refuse dangerous work, although rarely used (James, 1993: 45) offers the opportunity for workers to reposition themselves proactively in protecting their own health and safety. Workers now have the right to question what they consider unsafe practices, which offers the potential to have their truths heard and to make their knowledges credible. Now that OHS has become mobilized into a regime of truth, people can become active OHS subjects with the capacity to act (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006:182)

Discourse is a social practice and this suggests the importance of understanding the practices of subjectivity. The development of subjectivity within discourses is paradoxical. On the one hand, people are constituted within discourse as desiring, thinking, speaking and acting subjects who actively try to put discourses to work for them. On the other hand, subjects are constituted within discourses that establish what is possible (and impossible) to be, to think, to speak and to act (MacLure, 2003:175). The discourses within which we operate are so pervasive that we often are not conscious of how we are being governed by them. It is difficult to be fully aware of how the discourse defines what we count as true, of how our actions and words are those offered by the discourse, and how what we consider as intelligible/unintelligible is constituted by the discourse (Britzmann, 2000 in MacLure, 2003:175).

Foucault (1988, in Holstein & Gubrium, 2005:490) is particularly concerned with the actual and local sites 'that specify the practical operation of discourse'. Like Foucault, I wish to understand how subjectivities are constituted and enacted within the particular discourse of OHS and the particular practices that are associated with this. That is, I am looking at 'discourses in practice....the working mechanism of social life itself, as actually known and performed in time and place' (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005:490).

### **Power/knowledge**

Foucault claims that power is inextricable from knowledge, that knowledge is power, and that power resides in what is taken to be knowledge (Davies, 2000: 18). Power and knowledge are mutually constitutive of one another and are found together in regimes of truth (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006:182). Knowledge is

something that makes us subjects as we make sense of ourselves by referring back to various bodies of knowledge that we know (Danaher, et al., 2000:xiv). If knowledge can be imagined as a system that describes the way the world is, and it is taken for granted by the majority of the people in that society that the world is that way, then this shapes the possible actions and ways of being that those people can imaginably engage in (Davies, 2000: 18). In this way, knowledge exerts power over people by defining their possibilities for them. For example, legislation defines what “true” OHS knowledge is, and this has created the parameters for what actions are perceived to be required to keep the workplace safe. OHS pedagogic practices attempt to inculcate subjects in their own particular regimes of truth (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006:182). However, even this mandated knowledge is not the only or absolute true knowledge, for it is being continuously negotiated by stakeholders such as employer groups, trade unions and the regulator. At the same time, this “official” knowledge is hotly contested by workers as not necessarily representing their truth.

All knowledge starts with the sentient body that perceives the world through its senses (Zuboff, 1988:40). Workers develop this type of knowledge through daily engagement with their work, and it becomes written in the body as embodied knowledge. It is largely tacit, only ever partly articulated and relies heavily on context and situation (Farrell, 2006:51). OHS discourse attempts to codify this embodied knowledge by systematizing it and writing it down: it becomes explicit rather than tacit, textual rather than embodied and generic rather than specific. It is translated into the knowledge found in instruction manuals, policies and codes of practice (Farrell, 2006:47). Workers often suspect this official knowledge as not representing their hard won experiential knowledge. They can view it as a type of disciplinary practice that represents ‘economic advantages or political utility’ (Foucault, 1976: 101) as it subjugates them and privileges people in power. This suspicion erodes their faith in OHS legislation, and they have many stories to support it (Wadick, 2005b: 99).

It is important to stress that power refers to much more than law and the state apparatuses that administer it. Foucault explained that power should not be viewed only as autocratic, top-down power, based on the principle of the

monarch having absolute power over our lives. He uses the term 'relations of power' (Foucault, 1984: 34) to describe how power suffuses social organisation in a capillary fashion (Foucault, 1980e: 39). Power is rhizomatic in that we all have and exercise power in various ways in our everyday relationships with people. 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 & Thrift, 1995b: 41).

Foucault also claims that the exercise of power always breeds the potential for resistance (Foucault, 1982). For example, workers at a client of the author's do not accept the OHS regime of truth at their workplace unproblematically. To meet their KPI's they are supposed to systematically observe their workmates perform a task, record their findings and submit them to management (who are under pressure from the global parent company to count the number of these safety observations performed). This system requires them to become agents of power by disciplining others with their gaze and mete out 'punitive consequences' (Blumenfeld, et al., 2005: 19) by recording transgressions as they reinforce normalizing processes of capitalist power structures. The specific regime of truth in operation at that workplace produces and evaluates capacities for and execution of action through disciplinary processes of observation, normalising judgement and examination/assessment (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006:182). The law that obliges employers to provide a safe workplace is transformed from an instrument of coercive sovereignty to a normalising power exercised in a capillary fashion by workmates (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006:183). However the workers fill out the cards but, in collaborative acts of resistance, very rarely record a negative observation – they achieve their KPI's but keep their integrity as a united work team. They maintain their own sense of power through a resistance achieved by withholding their knowledge, their truth, from the organisation. In this way, they have become 'talented ventriloquists for a hateful status quo' (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000: 120). They seem to be complying with requirements, but they are only pretending because they do not value these safety observations as helping to keep them safe.

Additionally, power is not only restrictive or repressive; it also opens possibilities for action. In OHS discourse, the power associated with the regime of truth not only disciplines the transgressor, but offers capacities to act productively and for certain forms of subjectivity to be fashioned (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006:182). For example, contemporary OHS legislation now insists that workers are given a say in how to manage OHS at their workplaces, and that certain workers, such as OHS reps and committee members must be trained so they can be more effective OHS consultative subjects. OHS discourse therefore is attempting to empower more workers by creating the opportunity for them to have access to certain knowledges and skills made relevant and truthful by OHS discourse that will help them contribute to decision making affecting their health and safety, and this is the generative action of power.

### **Deconstruction**

Deconstruction is a method of analysing textual (verbal, written and cerebral) material that has developed from poststructuralist thinking that understands there are limits to Enlightenment rationality, especially 'totalizing explanatory frameworks...with [their] ahistoricism and universalism' (Lather, 2007:5). Deconstruction critiques the binaries which are a legacy of the Enlightenment (MacLure, 2003:179). According to Davies (2000:107), the binary logic

constitutes the world in hierarchical ways through its privileging of one term or category within the binary and depriving the opposite term of meaning in its own right. The privileged term defines the meaning of the subordinate term as other to itself.

Examples of this in OHS discourse are: boss versus worker, us versus them, safe versus unsafe, right versus wrong, and so on.

Deconstruction displaces these hierarchies and reveals the dependence of the privileged term on its other for its meaning. Meanings are not an immanent property of the words, but are given meaning by the speaker, based on their understanding of the term, and their position within the discourse. Deconstruction aims to understand hidden meanings behind narrative descriptions by picking apart symbolic representations and looking for wider agendas and influences of power. It searches for silences, gaps, and taken for



granted assumptions that hide what the author does not want to reveal (Martin, 2002a:289). It therefore carries an ethical and political intent (MacLure, 2003:179) because it can expose exclusion practices 'through which one set of meanings has been institutionalized and various other possibilities...have been marginalised' (Shapiro, 2001, in MacLure, 2003:179). In doing this it has the capacity to disrupt certainties of hegemonic discourses and allow for alternative voices to emerge.

Although it cannot easily be reduced to a technique that applies across all situations, I find it helps me if I ask the following types of questions of the material. I am indebted to Bronwyn Davies (2000:167), for many of these: Who is the author of this statement? Where does her/his authority lie? What are the effects of taking up this statement? What is hidden by this statement? What competing discourses are at play? Who benefits? Who pays?

The use of deconstruction in OHS research is a useful method to help resist taken for granted assumptions like common sense, and question the certainty of 'what can you do!' It tries to understand the historical influences on the development of these certainties and how certain interests may be privileged by maintaining them. It interrogates how power influences the discourse of OHS and who is privileged and how. The goal is to understand the hidden processes so as to possibly chart a more effective way forward.

### **Governmentality**

In this section I describe the concept of governmentality, as articulated by Foucault (1991) because it outlines pathways for analysing power that are useful for my comprehension of the development of OHS subjectivities. Governmentality is a way of understanding the government of people's conduct and refers to those practices that endeavour to 'shape, guide, and direct the conduct of others' (Rose, 1999:3), whether they be employees, families, school children or populations. To analyse governmentality Dean (1999, in Edwards and Nicoll, 2006:185) suggests that one must 'analyze those practices that try and shape, sculpt, mobilize and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups'. Such governing is not

purely oppressive but works 'on, through and with active subjects through the promotion of reflection and reflexivity' (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006:185). It is not simply constituted by the State enforcing its rules, but it works by the provision of apparatuses and techniques that require individual persons and the workplace groups to which they belong, to internalise rules and norms through self regulation and observation and monitor their performance against these in the effort to govern themselves. Hence, government is not so much directly and immediately repressive but is constituted by indirect mechanisms, or actions at a distance (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006:181), designed to administer independent subjects so that they internalise a disciplinary code (Martin, 2002b:60).

This shift in the nature of government reflects a change from external threat to internal process (Jackson & Carter, 1998:49). It colonises subjectivity by making acts of obedience and acts of truth seem normal and uncontestable (Jackson and Carter, 1998:50). Governmentality is not government by force, but emphasises the attempt to shape and guide the behaviour of people in modern societies who are formally considered as free (Martin, 2002b:59). Workers are offered the chance to re-shape their subjectivity through self-fashioning it into an ethical subject (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006:186). This is achieved by using practices through which one evaluates and acts on oneself, which Foucault called technologies of the self (Foucault, 2003f:147). Foucault defines technologies of the self as those practices which:

*Permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality.*

Governing is not only the mandate of the state or the sovereign, it occurs throughout society, in workplaces, in schools, jails, families and so on. The result of governing is that individuals accept the particular regime of truth to which they are being held. However, people do disobey and do transgress, but penalties apply. For example, WorkCover can prosecute employers for non-compliance with the law which encourages them to make workplace rules that they can enforce under threat of discipline that includes termination of employment. Knowing the penalties encourages compliance and can encourage

a compliance mentality that views OHS as more about following rules than keeping people safe.

The contemporary approach to OHS formally invites subjects to become a different kind of working subject, to become a speaking subject, one who entrepreneurs her/his own health and safety by engaging sufficiently and actively with the discourse and who uses their voice to make suggestions on how to make improvements to health and safety in the workplace. This is an invitation to challenge the status quo and even challenge the norms and regimes of truth. However, this does not frequently happen because OHS is more often perceived as compliance with rules rather than the opportunity to challenge the very mechanisms that make the rules. Most voice is used to negotiate on the subtext of the rules rather than the games of truth that make those rules seem normal and inevitable. Hence, we have reached the situation where OHS is often seen as giving employers more power to control workers through rules to govern their behaviour rather than giving workers more power to resist dangerous workplaces by speaking up in dissent. The workers self surveillance of their compliance is mainly restricted to monitoring their obedience to the safety rules rather than to the weight they give to their voice.

### **Research question(s)**

The purpose of this study is to understand how workers can become effective OHS subjects. To achieve this I examine the workers perceptions of their experience of learning to enact OHS subjectivities at work. The research questions for this study are:

- 1. How do workers learn to enact OHS subjectivities at work?***
- 2. To what extent do workers learn to enact agentic OHS subject positions?***
- 3. How do workers become effective OHS consultative subjects?***

I am hoping that the process of answering these questions will open up the field and describe the tensions, struggles and successes people encounter. By

describing these mechanisms I hope to be able to identify levers for change so as to map out some kind of optimistic way forward, a politics of hope.

## **What to expect in this thesis**

According to the Macquarie Dictionary, a thesis constitutes a proposition that is argued and discussed. In this thesis I gather data as evidence for making certain propositions which I argue and discuss. I lead you, the reader, through a process to explicate my line of reasoning. My argument culminates in recommendations that may help us improve the implementation of occupational health and safety and thereby make the world of work a safer and healthier place. Chapter 1 introduces the field, places the subjectivity of the researcher firmly in view, presents my theoretical framework and poses the research questions. I broach topics of poststructural theory such as language and meaning, subjectivity, discourse and truth, power/knowledge, deconstruction, and governmentality, and demonstrate how Foucault's understanding of these concepts has helped inform my own understanding of not only these topics, but my own epistemology and ontology. Reading Foucault and poststructural theory has helped me recast my life, tease it out and see it with new meaning.

In Chapter 2 I explore OHS subjectivity, how it develops, what it means and what this indicates for my research. To achieve this I trace a type of history or genealogy of OHS that describes the genesis of some of the influences that lead to the development of current OHS discourse. This shows that current OHS discourse has complex, fractured, non-linear and contradictory historical antecedents. OHS subjectivities are constituted within the navigation of pressures induced by the tensions between an economic system based on profits as the main goal, the obligation of governments to protect their citizens, workers demanding safer conditions, and people/organisations jostling for positions of power and influence while moving among personal priorities.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology employed in this research project and discusses the influence of the researcher in any research. I describe the methods I used to gather the data that form the basis of my argument, outline the processes I used for analysing the data, and touch on gaining ethics

approval. I describe in detail how I use an interpretive framework situated within a poststructural paradigm that privileges language, meaning, subjectivity, discourse and truth, and power/knowledge.

Chapter 4 is where I introduce some of my findings gained at various OHS courses I conducted; it sets the scene for further in depth analysis in subsequent chapters. The results are presented in this chapter in tables that evolved from coding responses to written questionnaires. In this chapter I begin to explore how OHS subjectivity is constituted within competing pressures and how agency is constrained by a discourse that often privileges costs and production over health and safety of workers.

I take this discussion further in Chapter 5, exploring in depth the actual constitution of particular OHS subjectivities using a mixture of written information and verbally co-constructed stories from OHS courses, and one story from an informal interview which I analyse in depth. In this chapter I begin to problematise the concept of agency and argue that agency is not simply the exercising of free will; agency is difficult because it implies a resistance to and disruption of normalising and hegemonic forces – it requires the mobilizing of a different self, a self that may previously have not existed, or existed furtively in the shadows. Agency does not automatically follow from increased knowledge or opportunity, but needs to be fuelled by desire.

Chapter 6 uses the words of interview participants to help describe perceptions held by workers regarding OHS discourse. It is shown how their OHS subjectivities are constituted within a discourse couched in the language of compliance and conflict. For OHS governance to be effective, subjects are required to internalize the many rules and requirements and enforce their own acts of compliance. However, as power breeds resistance, subjects do not just meekly follow directives but often contest them in line with their individual priorities. This contestation often means that they do not speak up and do not adopt any agentic subject position that can challenge the power relations of the status quo. I then take the analysis further and focus on a politics of hope – it is not good enough to purely understand the current situation without using this understanding to visualize not only a different future but to offer a map with

some signposts to create that future. In this section of Chapter 6 I reflect on the interviews to highlight the practices that workers find help them to develop proactive agentic subject positions. I argue that workers are more likely to enact such a position when they feel trusted and respected and that agentic subjectivities are constituted through wide ranging consultation and participation in decision making.

Chapter 7 turns these stories into a performance piece in the form of a 4 act play; this method of presenting data captures the complex negotiations involved in developing any kind of OHS subjectivity, and graphically illustrates how the development of a proactive agentic subject position involves many kinds of negotiations among competing pressures of power and influence of all types of stakeholders. The play also brings to life how enthusiastic and dedicated safety leadership has the power to create an environment that encourages people to adopt agentic subject positions and allow themselves to become speaking subjects who advocate that their voice be heard.

The final chapter, Chapter 8 offers concluding remarks, recommendations for action and some ideas for future research. In this chapter I explicitly address the three research questions of this thesis by grounding the words and experiences of the participants in relevant literature. I demonstrate how OHS subjectivities are never fixed or final because their development is ongoing, always contingent, iterative and heuristically reflexive. Subjectivity, agency and power are all implicated in the construction of the safe workplace, and if they are ignored OHS discourse will never reach its potential to help create safer workplaces that excel in improving the health and wellbeing of all who are involved. I also discuss in this chapter how my research contributes to scholarship in both the fields of OHS and education. I contend that my use of a poststructural framework makes an important contribution to the understanding of how to improve OHS by paying attention to the formation of workers subjectivities within the discursive formations of occupational health and safety in Australia. Allowing the focus to illuminate agency and power helps to understand the forces at play that encourage or discourage workers speaking up. Further, the study adds to the discipline of education by adding weight to the

argument that effective learning requires more than cognitive involvement; it also requires affective and emotional engagement of the subject if it is to be sustained and implicate practice. Learning involves one's whole being because it challenges one's identity, one's concept of and attachment to, one's perception of oneself.

Throughout this thesis I have included some pieces of creative writing that I have produced as a direct response to my involvement in the research. Each piece aims to capture a different stage or concept within the whole research project. In chapter one I presented a poem that bounced around my early wonderings about conducting the research. In chapter two I have included a cartoon to help visually explicate how the processes of governmentality and normalisation work. In chapter three I tell a personal story of the deep feelings evoked when reorienting subjectivity by challenging one's ontology and epistemology. Chapter seven presents the script of a 4-act play that I wrote to embody and place the minutiae of the social processes involved in negotiating subjectivity, agency and power. I conclude the thesis with a coda in which another poem captures my feelings at the end of the PhD process.

# Chapter 2. Setting the Scene

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## Introduction

In this chapter I explore OHS subjectivity and its development, and in particular what OHS subjectivity means, how or if OHS subjectivity develops and what this means for my research. To achieve this I trace a type of history or genealogy of OHS to try and locate and describe some sort of genesis of the concepts revealed.

I suggest that our contemporary concern for worker health and safety is a construct of our economic and social system. OHS is not an isolated area of interest:

It is inextricably interwoven into the entire warp and fabric of man's [sic] eternal quest for a healthy existence, a long and fruitful life, and a sense of well-being. It is an indivisible part of the concern of a society to reduce to the greatest degree possible the incidence of disease, accidents, disability and premature death (Follman, 1978:1).

It coincides with a rise in our concern for the health of people and their bodies (Foucault, 1980d:169-170; Rose, 1999: 6) from the time of the industrial revolution, and OHS is about bodies, about working bodies. This political investment in the body is infused with relations of power and domination because the body is only useful if it is both productive and subjected (Foucault, 1986a: 173).

The contemporary discourses of OHS are relatively new in terms of human history; Cash (2002:88) refers to Lacan's (1988) discussion of discourse in which Lacan suggests new discourses introduce implications of conflict because they 'can unsettle...established bonds, ties and practices'. New discourses inevitably involve a new set of subjective orientations, of new subjectivities and new intersubjectivities (Cash, 2002:88). New discourses initiate a 'battle' (Cash, 2002:89) about which particular forms of subjectivity will count as the proper ones. For example, OHS is often perceived as some outside malevolent



pressure to *slow you down* (Wadick, 2009b: 6); it is often separated from the workers' needs to preserve their body. Workers' embodied knowledge developed through praxis is being reshaped by administrative interventions about risk 'intended to shape who can take what risks and how' (Hood et al, 1992, in McWilliam, Singh, & Taylor, 2002:120).

I have been motivated to undertake this research largely because of the stories I hear, stories of concern and confusion – concern for personal health and safety, yet confusion over how OHS discourse supports this concern. And I wonder how we have reached this point. To answer this question I trace a history of the development of OHS discourse to demonstrate firstly the series of incremental, though indirect and non-linear, steps evolving from the early beginnings of the Industrial Revolution to the present, highlighting its haphazard and non-teleological development and arbitrary current status, and secondly to unpack the discourse to reveal more of its creative and helpful potential. This random nature of the development of OHS discourse and the consequent mutability of it, can give hope for those who wish to take OHS to the next level where it truly can help create a more equitable world.

All histories are 'types of fiction' (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996:193) in that they describe only a fraction of the past and reflect the ideology of the writer. Hence, what I portray is not presented as absolute truth but as a way of viewing some of the things that have gone before to look for antecedents in the present so as to reconceptualise the past from the present point of view (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984b:100). I am not trying to accurately recreate the past, but rather my goal is to understand the present by tracing it in the past (Burrell, 1998:18) because many current practices are rooted in 'anterior conditions not of our making' (Hall, 1996:15).

## **How did we get here?**

The history I am writing is akin to Foucault's genealogical approach to writing a history in which I use power as a lens to help us notice that certain interests are privileged, certain voices are either not respected or never raised, and some options or degrees of freedom are blocked (Alvesson, 2002:124). This type of

genealogy does not take the subject for granted but rather analyses the construction of subjectivity as an effect of power relations (Fendler, 1998:39). Concepts such as worker and manager, or employee/employer, have powerful historical constructions supported by material arrangements and constrain the possible range of experiences for people identified within those categories (Deetz, 1994:26). OHS literature rarely problematises power and power relations; for example, it does not question the effects of who writes the policies, procedures, vision statements and OHS management systems – these systems are usually driven by management and communicate certain interpretations of what is good practice and what needs to be accomplished, which can create a monopoly on the definition of values and ideals and reduce the number of possible interpretations (Alvesson, 2002:124, 125). This reluctance to address power relations tends to create a ‘smokescreening of issues of power behind a technical and misleadingly neutral vocabulary’ (Alvesson, 2002:123).

There is a certain aspect of the development of OHS that could be perceived as a ‘self-constituted class of experts who, through their talk, can establish truth or false hood’ (Burrell, 1998:15). These experts are the stakeholders who have much to gain and who have a voice legitimized within the discourse. They are the legislators, the employers, insurance companies, trade unions, OHS professionals, and, to a lesser extent, those who market OHS products. The truths and falsehoods change over time as stakeholders vie for ascendancy, and these truths and falsehoods may only be obliquely related to improving health and safety for the people in the workforce. For many workers it may be hard to identify what of these are the current truth; for them, they know what they experience and what they feel, and many will tend to rely on this commonsense knowledge developed over years of praxis, which is often portrayed by those with greater access to power as ‘inferior and not good enough’ (Wadick, 2007:149). Rarely do employees actually define the agenda, their truth of the discourse or even their own discourses.

According to Foucault, if one wishes to do historical work that has ‘political meaning, utility and effectiveness’ (Foucault, 1980f:64), then one must look to the struggles taking place. Using power as a lens on these struggles may

express some doubt as to the desirability of some of the contemporary and local OHS arrangements (Alvesson, 2002:124). Power has the capacity to define what is real, true and normal, and thus constrain peoples' actions by prioritising certain interests and neglecting others (Alvesson, 2002:122). I feel as though if I can make visible these arbitrary constraints then I may be able to offer some hope of unfreezing them to 'ultimately reclaim social actor efficacy...to make more satisfying choices' (Deetz, 1998:153).

It is not the constraints per se that are the central problem, but rather it is their normalisation, their naturalization (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996:199) that culminates in such rhetorical questions/comments as 'What can you do!' (Wadick, 2009b:6) and imply that a particular situation or circumstance is normal and natural for this kind of work. The norm expressed in the question/statement 'what can you do!' demonstrates Foucault's discussion of normalisation, power and surveillance. The person who utters this phrase is in no need of domination as s/he strategises her/his own subordination (Deetz, 1998:153). Through the gaze of her/his own self-surveillance, s/he exerts power over her or himself as 'he becomes the principle in his own subjection' (Foucault, 1977, in McKinley & Starkey, 1998a:2).

Such naturalization occurs when a social abstraction, such as "OHS", is separated from the conflicts of its historical development and treated as a 'concrete, relatively fixed entity' (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996:199). The consequence is that the reification becomes the reality, there is no choice, not even any concept of choice: it is what it is perceived as, and agency is exerted by the inanimate as it takes on a life of its own (Clegg, 1994:35). A typical objective of genealogy is to problematise these sorts of commonplace assumptions (Fendler, 1998:39) and demonstrate that such assumptions are historically produced rather than absolute truths in themselves (Jones, 2005:91). I will demonstrate that OHS discourse is a product of a particular kind of discursive enterprise and not an independently given object (Henriques, et al., 1984b:101). The importance of this genealogy is to work out how workers have become objects of a specific practice such as OHS, understand the development of current normalising practices, how OHS discourse is trying to

constitute a safe worker, and the workers' perceptions of what this means. To achieve this I question received knowledges, that is, knowledge received relatively passively through suppressing one's own voice and privileging the voice of a perceived 'higher authority' (Taylor, 1994:762). I examine the historical emergence of the knowledge of the dominant paradigm(s) and attempt to locate the roots of this knowledge in evolving relations of power (McKinley & Starkey, 1998b:113). I try to demonstrate how knowledge and truth are produced out of power struggles and are then used to authorise and legitimate those same workings of power (Danaher, et al., 2000:64).

OHS discourse seems to be developing at least 2 parallel but (almost) mutually exclusive strands, and the content of these strands is determined by whose interest is being served. To comprehend one of the strands we must understand that the employer carries the principal statutory duty of care to ensure a safe workplace. Employers demonstrate fulfillment of their duty of care obligations by proving due diligence to a court of law. To achieve this they need to present evidence of their efforts, and this is largely constituted by documented evidence – various kinds of paperwork that show the employer has taken all reasonably practicable steps to eliminate or control foreseeable hazards. This seems innocuous enough on the surface; however, beneath the apparent logic of this type of defence lurks a potential monster, summarised by a research participant in another study as 'who has the most paperwork wins' (Wadick, 2009b:7). Paperwork is perceived as protecting the employer from liability (Borys, 2008). However, it is not always perceived by workers as protecting their health and safety but more as a burden forced onto them by management.

This brings me to the second strand. Employees do not want to get hurt by their work (Wadick, 2007), and are often proactive undertaking activities that reduce the negative health and safety influences of their jobs (Wadick, 2008:356, 359). Employees look after their own health and safety through "common sense" and being careful (Borys, 2008; Wadick, 2007), although the outright effectiveness of this is debatable as the high rates of injury and disease attest. They trust their own skills more than paperwork to keep them safe (Borys, 2008; Holmes & Gifford, 1997; Wadick, 2005b). Borys (2008), exploring risk awareness as a

cultural approach to safety, also found that managers focused on collecting OHS paperwork; the paperwork created an illusion of safety for managers as much as common sense did for workers.

The two strands can be summarised as a top-down management initiated approach rooted in fear of liability, and an employee mindfulness of being safe within their own workplace, which is frequently constituted within tensions created by pressures of production. The employer led approach has the official status of being enshrined in company policies and procedures while the employee initiatives often lurk, almost undetected, in the shadow side of the organisation (Egan, 1994) where they are usually covert, unspoken and unacknowledged (Egan, 1994:xi).

To flesh out my concept of the concurrent yet often mutual exclusiveness of the 2 strands, I will now refer to a story from a current 4-day OHS course that I am conducting to train members of OHS committees to fulfill their new role. I present only 1, but I hear many, many, many similar types of stories in my work and research. Two employees working in small regional offices for a national organisation mocked the requirement that they conduct and document safety inspections of their office space every week and submit the results to head office. Their environment is relatively low risk and their workstations have already been consultatively designed for ergonomically recommended best practice standards, and there is separate monitoring of this. They agree that the requirement for such regular inspections is ridiculous, and suggest that many employees do not take it seriously, but nevertheless, fill them out and submit them as per their key performance indicator (kpi) demands. Yossi Berger terms this type of liability driven paperwork as 'degenerate OHS activity' (Berger, 1999:52), and in this instance it creates, or adds to, the impression that OHS is not only unhelpful but also a waste of time. People can become skeptical of OHS and perceive it as both unnecessary and diversionary (NSW Government, 2007:xiii). As OHS committee members whose function is to review OHS management, these employees feel as though they cannot suggest to cut back the inspections to a more realistic time frame of, say, once every 3 months. If they did have the power to alter the schedule to something that reflects their

understanding of the risks they face to their health and safety, they may allow the two strands to interconnect like genes in coiled chromosomes and their OHS subjectivity would develop in harmony with corporate OHS discourse rather than either in opposition or in tension with it.

Whereas our own personal health and safety is fundamental to our identity and our subjectivities, OHS discourse is often positioned as a place of derision and of low level learning. Consequently, the official discourse threatens to cauterize the development of any meaningful OHS subjectivity because individuals can become suspicious of its motives and intentions. I hope that an outcome from this research and thesis will be to suggest ways that will encourage people to align their individual and personal positions with those offered by the rhetoric and posturing of official OHS discourse.

## **The last 200 years**

The gradual development of a field of OHS knowledge and practice, especially over the last 200 in years westernised countries is constitutive of specific power relations that discipline workers bodies, that make them docile bodies – bodies that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved (Foucault, 1986c: 180). OHS imposes on bodies infinitesimal disciplinary requirements to be docile and useful. These disciplines have been adopted in response to particular economic and social needs that have shifted with fluctuating requirements of the historical development of workplaces.

Before the industrial revolution, society in much of Europe and Britain was largely based on agriculture and small cottage industries located in rural areas and small, close-knit villages. People were heavily influenced by tradition, church and the seasons of nature. Most government functions were performed at a local level, with limited influence from a centralized bureaucracy; money was in short supply and the barter system was very important (Clark, 2003: 1-3). Hallmarks of this type of production are local, small scale, limited mechanization and handcrafted by skilled artisans and their apprentices. Most work required the regular physical and strenuous force of the laboring body. In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the pre-industrial world, there was an increase in social cleavage

and upheaval as evidenced by peasant insurrections and violent disturbances by urban workers (Zuboff, 1988:31). Many occupations resulted in pain and physical alterations to the body. OHS was not controlled in any systematic fashion. Craft guilds in medieval Europe were highly regulated and autocratic (Farrell, 2006:5) and relied on the often monopolistic authority of those in charge. The pre-industrial lifestyle carried many risks that people accepted because the choice in a subsistence economy is death (Dwyer, 2000:159).

The Industrial revolution heralded many changes. An economy based on seasons, harvests, feasts and holidays was transformed into one based on the 'rhythms of the industrial machine, overseer, and the clock of factory discipline' (Clegg, 1998:36). Steam and horse power reduced worker control and increased that of the master, and created resistance (Clegg, 1998:36). The mechanization of farming and manufacturing allowed for huge increases in production with the concomitant aggregation of people in central places. Many people left their rural lifestyles and moved to work in factories that concentrated in cities. This new way of living and working brought new health hazards previously unknown (Follman, 1978: 13) and resulted in a huge increase in injury and disease (Gunningham, 1985: 22). The new mode of production meant that many people worked for a single employer whose main aim was to make profits (Burke, 1985), and management prerogative was bureaucratised and systematised into a structured and hierarchical control system (Dwyer, 2000:161).

The new economic ideology exercised power over both the employer and employee, influenced management thinking, pervaded all decision making and was unquestioned even by the workers (Alvesson, 2002:122). The new capitalist system of factory production required a new type of employment contract constituted in the employer/employee relationship. The employment contract resulted in asymmetrical power relationships and the actors in those relationships, then and now, have differing access to resources and different possibilities when deciding how reality is to be defined (Alvesson, 2002:121).

To understand the concept of management prerogative and its influence on OHS subjectivity I return to Foucault's discussion of power. Power can take many forms in the way it is exercised. Disciplinary power was rapidly adopted in

the early capitalist industrialisation (Clegg, 1998:35). The power that management had over workers was based in a style of autocratic power of the monarch who has absolute control over their subjects. If the worker wanted a job, they had to submit to this control by coming to work on time and doing what they were told while at work. In those early years of the industrial revolution the factories were run along the lines of prisons, with gates to keep workers inside and non workers outside. Once inside, the main aim was production. Management always had (has) the power to hire and fire and to allocate tasks and resources. Management define what to value and what to accomplish. Workers learned early on in this mode of production that their voice was not required, just their “hands”, their bodies. Even now workers are often referred to in this way: for example, leading hand, all hands on deck, lend a hand, and so on. People were (are) recruited basically ‘to get the job done’ (Fineman, 1994:78).

Workplaces in the capitalist factory were (are) not democratic but autocratic. Whereas the employees/workers are fully accountable to management, management is only minimally accountable to those whom they manage. Management control was (is) not often based on seeking active consent but rather ‘conditional compliance’ (Alvesson & Wilmott, 1996:34) of the managed. Consequently, managers are obliged to develop forms of inducement and punishment through which they endeavour to minimise resistance and dissent (Alvesson & Wilmott, 1996:34).

I now wish to explore the concept of *normalisation* as a means of motivating workers to actively consent to their own subjection and subjectification. In my own mind, and in my writings at the time, I called my early years of deconstruction described briefly in Chapter 2 as ‘de-conditioning’. I consciously withdrew myself away from prying eyes, from the normalising gaze of all people who noticed and/or commented on what I said and did. I even hid from those ‘do-gooders’ who would try and save me and re-educate me; I tried to rid myself of the conditioning that made me who I was.

Ever since birth, in all societies, people are subject to enculturation, or the processes and procedures that induct them (us) into how to be an accepted and



acceptable member of their (our) cultural group. This socialisation is successful when the object of it, the individual person, no longer needs external reinforcement but has internalized the norms to the extent that they permeate all thoughts, words and actions. This process of socialisation or conditioning is called “normalisation” by Foucault, and at work it invites, encourages and even demands the person learn and internalize workplace norms.

Workers are gathered together and their conduct is made visible by being judged against institutional norms (Rose, 1999:214). Firstly, OHS responsibilities, accountabilities, duties and obligations are written into job descriptions; then when a person begins work they are given an induction that specifically describes OHS expectations; workers sign documents to say they understand and will follow certain procedures; they are given various sorts of personal protective equipment that makes them visible; such notions as lost time injuries and key performance indicators have been invented, along with statistical devices to assess them, and organisational procedures have been developed to distribute individuals in light of them. Graphs of statistics are displayed on noticeboards and workers are encouraged to measure and compare themselves in relation to these numbers. The power of these numbers is not purely disciplinary, but it is also generative in that it encourages the workers to strive for maximizing their achievement in terms of the norms that are represented by the numbers. Each person becomes proactive in implementing the norms and encouraging others to do so. Those who deviate from these norms are abnormal and need fixing; they are easily identified because they are made visible by the numbers or their straying from the dressage. Their deviant behaviour is sanctioned so as to correct it and minimise their non-conformance.

Employees who remain with such companies choose to give their tacit consent to these arbitrary institutional arrangements as if they were natural and incontestable (Deetz, 1998:159). It is in this consenting that they actively and often unknowingly accomplish the interests of others, and alternative storylines or discussions are foreclosed or appear unnecessary (Deetz, 1998:159). In this action, employees tend to subordinate themselves and make it more difficult to raise a voice of dissent to act on the current institutional arrangements. The

dominant arrangements normalize people and events along the lines of certain interests; in OHS, these are very often managerial interests spawned by the requirement that injury statistics are minimised to counter the threat of legal liability.

Certain techniques of power were invented to meet the demands of production (Foucault, 1980b:161), and as a result factory workers were (are) subjected to constant monitoring and surveillance by the overseers. This was (is) reminiscent of Foucault's description of Bentham's panopticon that provides a technology for 'permanent surveillance' (Foucault, 1980f:71) in which 'relatively few officials control large numbers...by foregrounding both hierarchy and visibility' (Schmetzer, 1993, in Davies, 2005a:172). They learned to control their movements and to submit to management prerogative, although this always had elements of resistance (Foucault, 1980b:163). This disciplinary technology took (takes) several forms – observations, drills and training of the body, standardised actions over time, and through the control of space (Rabinow, 1986:17). This power of the omnipresent gaze (Foucault, 1986d:193) promoted and promotes a system of normalisation through organising and coercing daily behaviour of individuals in such a regular fashion that it became and becomes unquestioned normal behaviour. Workers learn to self govern by interiorising the gaze of those who control them to the point that they become their own overseer (Foucault, 1980b:155).

Cartoon 1 on the following page of this chapter provides a pictorial view of how I have interpreted this into a modern context of OHS discourse. The cartoon shows the progression throughout the life of a person, every person, who is subjected to the normalising gaze of surveillance. Parents exert the gaze onto their children and try to bring them up to be good members of society; as parents we consider ourselves successful if we can get the children to the point where they no longer need our supervision to ensure their compliance. We encourage them to be creative within the boundaries offered within conformance requirements. Children then go to school and other educational establishments that reinforce this social conditioning and further teach them how to be good and

Cartoon 1. OHS as Dressage



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productive citizens. All the while they are under constant surveillance and subject to strict discipline.

They move into work where they learn that they need to produce, to be docile, to make a profit for the boss, and be accountable for their actions. The goal is the almighty dollar. An associated goal is to foster a career and make a successful project of the self by embracing the limited options offered. Some people do not easily fit these moulds, and slip through the cracks, such as when I opted out of society. However, these people are still defined by the system as maladjusted and there are many mechanisms to measure them, describe and define their abnormalities with reference to what is normal, and bring them back into the fold. OHS discourse has now become part of the workplace, and people are entreated and/or forced to take it up as their own. A whole industry (to which I belong) is fostered by a relationship with statutory requirements that establishes acceptable norms and practices by which people can compare and measure themselves. The workplace is still autocratic, but OHS invites workers to participate in decisions that affect their health and safety, although most workers know that this is really subterfuge because they have no real voice, they mainly have the power to consent to the imbalance of profits being held as more important than their own health and safety. However, this offer to consult, to become involved, does offer the potential for workers to have more of a say, to become more involved with their own bio project of improving their health and well being.

It must be remembered that when I speak of surveillance, the gaze and normalisation, I am not just speaking here of management control over their employees. I am referring to all workers in the capitalist mode of production. Management also experience(d) this oppression as they were (are) subject to production pressures such as targets, budgets, appraisals, and performance (Alvesson & Wilmott, 1996:23). Even the most senior management feel the full effects of the surveillance of their performance. For example, by the 1950's organisational literature viewed the managerial class as even more thoroughly controlled than the worker who at least retained a private life not under corporate guidance (Deetz, 1994:26). There is no us and them, subjectivity is

constituted within the continuum of opportunities afforded to each individual and these positions are not equally available to all subjects (Hollway, 1984:236). All are actors subject to and subjects of the gaze on their performance. Each person in the workplace is not only the target of the exercising of power, they are also 'the elements of its articulation' (Foucault, 1976:98). Much of the current system of factory-like production offered(s) few alternatives for building individual subjectivity - workers were (are) offered a limited choice – *if you want to work with us you perform*, one's work becomes dressage as one performs for the gaze of productivity (See cartoon 1). These 'disciplined performances' (Rose, 1995:337) are put on for an audience that expects certain displays and rejects others. We can see here how one of the prime effects of power is that certain bodies, gestures, discourses and desires come to be identified and constituted as individuals (Foucault, 1976:98). But, because people are 'thinking beings' (Foucault, 1988:148), and as power produces effects at the level of desire, and power produces knowledge (Foucault, 1980a:59), they want their body to survive and they learn how to be careful.

After 200 years of OHS regulation there is still high incidence of workplace injury and disease because employees and employers have conflicting interests (Nichols & Tucker, 2000:286), yet this conflict is ignored in much OHS literature (Nichols and Tucker, 2000:286). This conflict provides the precursors to the apparent disjunction between productivity and safety, to the tensions created in using your common sense to be careful while ensuring you maintain whatever productivity is expected. The development of the discourse of OHS has its roots in this paradox. When deconstructing the discourse of OHS, Foucault would ask 'whom does [this] discourse serve?' (Foucault, 1986f:57). The discourse itself is neither true nor false but it is interesting to try to understand how it has come to produce truth and historically how the effects of truth are produced within this discourse. One impact of this has been its contribution to the 'us versus them' dualism that plagues much labour history.

In the early years of the industrial revolution people worked under the rule of freedom of contract, which meant that liability for injury or death was accepted by the worker by virtue of agreeing to being employed (Dorman, 2000: 352). The

need to accept responsibility for one's own injury/ill health, and therefore for one's safety led to the development of a deeply ingrained understanding of responsibility as an individual matter (Alvesson, 2002:99). This sowed the seeds of what we still witness today, the tendency to blame the injured individual worker for not being careful enough (Wadick, 2007:146) or blaming them for not being able to cope (Wadick, 2008) rather than addressing the hazards and risks at the workplace. This is where reliance on "common sense" to keep you safe can trace its antecedents. Being careful was a 'pragmatic accommodation to the facts' (Freire, 1994:50); being careful was one's only defence in the face of the high risk environments of the new factory regime. Common sense is a deeply embodied feeling developed over years of trial and error and interaction with one's environment. It is infused with pain, suffering, joy, hope and longing; it is fundamental to one's subjectivity as it is deep personal learning gained from lived experience. Physical experience precedes language (Baker et al, 2002, in de Carteret, 2008:242) and is more primal than language, and is not easily replaced or swayed by language.

However, this reliance on common sense and being careful in the face of heretofore never encountered hazards led to a 'massacre' (Dwyer, 2000: 152) and is being repeated today where previously agrarian subsistence economies are being rapidly industrialized and where business does not view the management of worker health and safety as integral, but as a barrier to trade (Dwyer, 2000: 152; Nyland, Smyth, & Juihua Zhu, 2005: 180).

During the early years of the industrial revolution labour was fairly plentiful, cheap and dispensable; it still is in some countries that are newly industrializing, or in some industrialized countries such as manufacturing by clothing outworkers in Australia. Health and safety of workers was not a priority beyond the necessity of workers being able to continue work. By modern western standards, working conditions were very harsh – long hours, poor amenities, child labour and dangerous/unhealthy working environs. Capitalism itself has not been proactive in providing for worker health and safety (Milles, 1985: 58). Rather, improved OHS has resulted from trade union advocacy, government

regulation (Machtan, 1985: 213), social pressure (Frick & Wren, 2000; Jones, 1985: 223), and, to a lesser extent, economic necessity (Cumpston, 1992: 20).

Hence, the gradual improvement of worker health and safety has occurred as a result of social, economic and political factors (Gray, 2002:135). From then until now it has been a function of the tension between at least 7 competing and interrelated interests, each with access to different kinds of power. It could almost be seen as a history of 'conflicts between social groups in the course of historical change' (Labisch, 1985:41). The first and preeminent of these was the capitalist economic system's need to extract maximum effort and output from the labour force for minimum expenditure by the employer (Bryder, 1985:112). The almost unbridled expression of this need became tempered by government's desire to reduce costs and risks of injury, with industry repeatedly resisting evidence and recommendations (Cumpston, 1992:218). Even within governments there have been competing forces, as the 'State' is not a homogenous monistic force (Hall, 1996:12-13). A third and powerful influence was organised labour, mainly symbolized by trade unions, that demanded more humane working conditions (Labisch, 1985:36; Meacher, 1985). A fourth influence was exerted by society at large, whose gradual changing expectations forced capital to look after labour (Labisch, 1985:33). A more recent influence has been exerted by workers compensation insurance systems that make employers contribute to the costs of accidents (Follman, 1978:111). A sixth influence could be described as a health and safety industry that has spawned as a direct result of the tensions between the first five interests. This is constituted by a health and safety profession supported by research, education and training, and an industry that manufactures, markets and sells health and safety products. This group of stakeholders has helped OHS discourse and the effects of its power to circulate throughout society (Foucault, 1986f:61). A seventh influence has been globalization with its concomitant increase in competition and need to decrease costs and improve quality to remain competitive. An efficient means of achieving this goal is to make 'aggressive and intelligent use of human resources' (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999:11) by reducing and minimizing all costs associated with injuries, illness and wellbeing.

By virtue of these tensions, much of the language of health and safety has become couched in the language of struggle, of the struggle between boss and worker, between boss and boss, between industry and government, between government and government, between government and worker, and worker and worker. Poststructuralists consider it of vital importance to make language visible as a tool of power, as 'an object force, shaping bodies, shaping desire, shaping perception' (Davies, 2005b:106). Language does not just represent meaning, it actually produces meaning (Jones, 2005:89). The language used in OHS discourse does not always reflect some true and indisputable reality, it creates and produces what counts as reality.

For example, a book written in 1918 speaks of 'battles', 'struggles of the Class War', and refers to employers as 'masters' and employees as 'slaves'; uses 'spies' to describe certain persons employed who would 'dob' on their workmates (Dale, 1918). This language is still in use today – recent research by the author quotes an employee referring to the OHS rep that he voted for as a 'spy' (Wadick, 2009b) because he now spent time talking to the boss instead of working. At one of my recent courses a newly appointed OHS representative said that the workers who he now represents call him a *suck up* as they accuse him of collusion with the bosses because he now negotiates with them. These OHS reps are caught between 'contradictory discourses' (Walkerdine, 1995:319) and must renegotiate their new and 'hybrid subjectivities' (Lucey, Melody, & Walkerdine, 2006:240), which is never easy.

The language used in those early years is in keeping with the brutal treatment meted out by the mining magnates (Dale, 1918:iii). The *Silver Age*, a local paper in Broken Hill exclaimed on July 4, 1892: 'Public opinion is universally against the mining companies because they tore up the agreement of '89' (in Dale, 1918:27), and goes on to accuse industry and government of collusion. The language of much labour literature reflects the ongoing conflict between capital and labour. From the late 1800's and early 1900's trade unions involved in mining at Broken Hill 'fought' (Reeves, 1988:59) for better and regulated health and safety standards. They went on strike for better safety standards and working conditions in 1892 and 'lost' (Reeves, 1988:61). The community-wide



experience of deprivation, of police protection of non-union labour, and of arbitrary company power, shaped community attitudes for decades (Reeves, 1988:61). It demonstrates how political systems endeavour to define what is true, moral and correct, and their efforts are directed towards economic productivity in a capitalist economy where the interests of capital are the interests of the nation (Ramsay, 1977), which becomes the rationale for government intervention (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999:19-20). This 'cultural imperialism' (Youngman, 1996, in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999:20) is capitalism's method of privileging an economy driven by the needs of big business and profits.

The industrial movements at Broken Hill helped spawn industrial health reforms across Australia, although many of these were won through militancy because it was considered the only way to get the governments and employers to take note (Reeves, 1988:73). However, government interventions were made possible by the gradual rise of 'noso-politics' (Foucault, 1980d:171), by which Foucault meant the preservation, upkeep and conservation of the labour force to ensure their utility (Foucault, 1980d:171). We may see in these early encounters some background into contemporary workplace conflicts epitomised in such binary thinking as boss versus worker. Many of the current social and OHS configurations are a result of historical development rather than absolute truths in themselves. The discourse produces truth – truth is an effect internal to the discourse (Foucault, 1994:253).

The employers rarely "gave in" (note here how I am having difficulty in avoiding the language of confrontation and struggle) easily and very often resisted until government regulation defined and required new minimum standards. For example, mining companies at Broken Hill ignored research evidence linking mining with respiratory diseases (Reeves, 1988:66), and mine managers fought against improvements (Cumpston, 1992; Reeves, 1988:67). A Royal Commission in 1914 found an increased risk of respiratory diseases among mine workers and made many recommendations which were not carried out (Cumpston, 1992:15). Despite mounting evidence throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century miners at Broken Hill were still being exposed to hazardous dust levels in the

late 1970's (Cumpston, 1992:24). A similar story can be traced for asbestos exposure with regular denials by employers despite mounting evidence from employees and communities (Cumpston, 1992:29-32; Johnstone, 2004:9). Yet, the hazards of mining for the respiratory system were described by Paracelsus in 1567, and in 100 AD, Pliny developed the idea of using sheep bladders as respiratory masks (Follman, 1978:10-11). Throughout these struggles employers often colluded with governments to minimise the administration of recommendations to improve worker health and safety (Dale, 1918). For example, the Wise Royal commission in 1914 was influenced by the powerful mining industry and handed down very weak recommendations, and even these were not implemented (Reeves, 1988:66).

Language used in OHS has influences on perceptions. For instance, using the term 'occupational diseases' instead of 'workers' diseases' is an illustration of how language is merely a representation of the reality, and the way it is used in this example speaks a 'value neutral' (Milles, 1985:55) term that is subject to the needs of industrial capitalism rather than the needs of the damaged workers. It subtly depersonalises the disease by shifting the wording from worker, and objectifies it by aligning it with a mode of production. The same effect is achieved by the use of the term 'collateral damage' to describe the death of innocent citizens during modern warfare. This neutral writing is silent about the inherent conflicts of interest that underlie the choice of language and describes the status quo without recording any objections (Martin, 2002a:170). It does not challenge the tacit and unexamined interest orientations of this constructed truth. It tends to normalize the outcome and thereby make it more acceptable.

Throughout these times, several streams emerged that helped form today's OHS discourse. These have not developed in a functional, rational, arboreal or linear fashion in which each improvement builds on a former one, a concept characterised by modernist thinking. No, as post-structuralists would argue, the evolution of OHS discourse has been diverse, fluid, illusionary and contested, (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999:356). It has been adopted as a response to particular needs of particular stakeholders and its truths are contested by these stakeholders.

As we have seen from the preceding discussion, the worker versus boss struggle is spoken into existence through years of mistrust and abuse. However, a poststructural approach recognises ambiguity: not all managers/employees are the same – some do understand the other and try hard to be fair and just. To reiterate what I said above, managers are also workers and are subject to the same pressures of OHS. Conflicts are not all black or white and ‘sometimes interests do not congeal along such clearly defined group lines’ (Martin, 2002a:175). Employers haven’t always fought against improving health and safety measures. From the time of the introduction of legislated workers compensation insurance throughout the western world towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century employers became increasingly interested in financial costs of accidents and ill health (Milles, 1985:67) and began, by their own volition to take steps to reduce injury ‘if only out of self interest’ (Follman, 1978:15). Thus, insurers became a new stakeholder in this business, and their influence in Australia is extremely strong as they make employers more accountable for the costs of injuries. In this example, once again, it is not the workers’ injuries that are the focus of OHS, but the costs of these injuries. So, even though employers have at times been proactive in improving worker health and safety, an important motivator has been a self serving desire to reduce costs rather than an ethical or moral conviction to protect the people who actually create their capital with the surplus value of their labour.

Yet another contraindicating example is that employees and trade unions at times resisted some government or employer led initiatives that were supposedly designed to improve the detection of worker ill health. In the face of lead poisoning being common at Broken Hill and Port Pirie, and despite urging from governments from the 1920’s to the 1960’s, mines had still not introduced mandatory health screenings because of union and employee resistance. Unions opposed and boycotted initiatives to test workers for lead because they thought the results would be used to sack those who were contaminated (Cumpston, 1992:11-12). Again, in 1956-65 when several cases of tuberculosis were discovered in mine workers, there was strong opposition from the men at the mines to any form of compulsory medical examination (Cumpston, 1992:20).

Unions would not agree to compulsory wearing of safety glasses even though eye injuries continued to be the highest incidence of injury in mining at Broken Hill. Also, in 1965 at a Hammersley Iron Ore project unions were suspicious of a company hearing conservation program because they thought it was designed to stop payouts once workers were trained and offered hearing protection (Cumpston, 1992:110). However, once they realised that compensation would still be payable they agreed to the program.

Where is 'truth' in all this? Whose truth was heard? Even though mine workers knew of the risks and almost certain shortening of their lives, they still elected for secure employment over early detection and consequent uncertain employment. Why this resistance, this distrust, this power struggle? A speedy resolution would have benefited both parties. People were still 'weighed down in the old beliefs...that do not correspond to (our) problems' (Deleuze, 1994:326), demonstrating the difficulty of changing the tide of historical forces.

We can trace the history of a recurring theme in OHS management, that of blaming the injured worker for not being careful enough (Shaw & Blewett, 2000:465; Wadick, 2005b; Weindling, 1985: 18). This may have developed from the rule of freedom of contract that placed responsibility for worker health and safety on the individual worker. Official reports in Queensland between 1877-1899 suggested carelessness caused approximately 60% of workplace accidents (Cumpston, 1992:33). An investigation by a government appointed commissioner into many fatal accidents at Broken Hill mines documented his opinion, in 1897, that the main reason for accidents 'was want of care or skill by the victim' (Cumpston, 1992:35). By 1920 at Cornwall in Britain respirators were made available to miners, who considered them hot and uncomfortable, yet 'men who did not wear them were subsequently "blamed" for developing phthisis (Burke, 1985:83). The prevailing view was the 'the dirty worker was responsible for his own illness' (Harrington, 1999 in Moodie-Bain, 2008:8). That is, employers blame workers for reckless behaviour rather than themselves for not providing a work environment in which recklessness was not needed (Burke, 1985:86).

Much research tended to support management's view that the causes of workplace illness and injury lay with the workers rather than jobs designed for workers (Johnstone, 2004:23). Even the Robens report of 1972 that heralded the modern emphasis on consultation and employer statutory duty of care blamed worker 'apathy' (Lord Robens, 1972:par 13) as the main cause of accidents (Nichols & Armstrong, 1997:38). However, not all OHS research supported this view; in 1991, a UK government report declared that the majority of accidents are not caused by careless workers, but by a failure in control which is the responsibility of management (Nichols & Tucker, 2000:293).

Gray (2002) develops an interesting argument to demonstrate that there are now more subtle ways of keeping the individual responsible for their own safety. He suggests that the modern right to refuse dangerous work is one of the components of the 'internal responsibility system' (Gray, 2002:134) which relies on individual workers taking initiative and voicing safety concerns. This system, by inference, encourages, or even demands, that workers take responsibility for their own safety while at work (Gray, 2002:135). Confirming this continuing reliance on the individual to take responsibility for their own safety, a recent report by Shaw Idea to the NSW Department of Primary Industries notes that there is a reluctance by industry to manage risks at their source, with an increasing take up of strategies that focus on worker behaviour as the primary means of risk control (NSW Government, 2007:xiv). This is despite the fact that providing a safe and healthy workplace is 'the legal and moral responsibility of management' (NSW Government, 2007:xiv).

An effect of discourse is to define truths and enshrine these truths as norms, or normal. OHS discourse has successfully normalized the concept that injured workers should be blamed for not being careful enough, or not concentrating, or being forgetful, or any number of things that demonstrate the injury was largely their own fault. Workers have learned to internalize this truth to the extent that they self regulate by interiorising the story of individual responsibility and culpability. These individualistic explanations that blame the worker deprive the workers of the power to act on their environment; they can only act on their behaviour, which reinforces the strategy of strict enforcement of rules. This does

not encourage speaking out, silences those who do not conform, and offers limited capacity to bring in changes. It works as an agent of Foucauldian surveillance and control (Shaw & Blewett, 2000:465) or the 'conduct of conduct' (Rose, 1999:3) by focusing on individual behaviour rather than the systems/environment that spawned that behaviour. Butler (2006:66) counsels that if we restrict ourselves to a 'politics of acts' by trying to change the actions of people without addressing the hegemonic systems that underpin them, we will have difficulty in transforming those actions and may merely reinforce the power of the hegemony.

### **Now and into the future: what hope for change?**

Frick and Wren (2000:41) identify three distinct waves of reform in OHS although other authors use different defining categories (Tucker, 1995, in Gray, 2002). The first was from the early 1800's to the 1960's and consisted of a series of ad hoc pieces of legislation that targeted specific hazards in particular industries, and was based on imposing rules and regulations on workers by management under direction of governments (Dwyer, 2000:173). The second was the 1960's to the 1980's and heralded an approach epitomized by the Robens report in England (Lord Robens, 1972) that provided for a statutory duty of care requiring all employers to provide safe workplaces, and stressed the importance of consultation with workers. The third began in the 1980's and continues today, exemplified by recent legislation in Australia that requires all employers to consult with workers about health and safety matters and to use a risk management approach to managing OHS hazards.

Should we be hopeful that this emphasis on OHS consultation and risk management will be effective in reducing injuries? The proponents of consultation trumpet its virtues: the workers are usually the ones who suffer injury and disease rather than management, and they often have more detailed knowledge of the hazards they face (Walters & Frick, 2000:44) so it makes sense to give them the opportunity to have an opinion. Workers have a vested interest in health and safety (Milgate, Innes, & O'Loughlin, 2002:288), and the Robens (Lord Robens, 1972: par 66) model of consultation assumed that 'there

is a greater natural identity of interest between the two sides in relation to safety and health problems than in most other matters’.

Nevertheless, consultation is infused with unequal power relationships and does not unproblematically lead to safer workplaces. Management has not abdicated decision making which leaves the majority of employees without the power to make any real changes on their own. It is debatable if these rights can challenge the social relations of production that enshrine management’s right to define what workers do (Gray, 2002:137). It may also be viewed as one method of transferring responsibility for health and safety to workers: now they have a voice it is their responsibility to inform management of the dangers and suggest safer alternatives. The inference may be that if you did not speak up and you did not refuse to do the dangerous work, it is your fault.

Discourse theory suggests that each discourse has its own rules that limit the sayable (Henriques, et al., 1984b:105) and make possible what can be said and what can be done (Walkerdine, 1984:154). There are constraints and norms that ‘condition our struggle for legitimacy as speaking subjects’ (Failler, 2005:96). Discourses are not mutually exclusive but contiguous and/or overlapping. Hence, the discourse of OHS overlaps with the discourse of management prerogative which further proscribes and prescribes what can, should and must be said. To be allowed legitimate participation as speaking subjects in any discourse we must know the difference between the speakable and unspeakable (Failler, 2005:96-97).

To speak the unspeakable risks sanction and one’s status as a genuine speaking subject. Butler (1997, in Failler, 2005:98) uses the term ‘foreclosure’ to describe how a person limits what they say to the speakable, and when this occurs it has the effect of ‘shutting out [of] certain realities or possibilities’ (Failler, 2005:98). This self ‘censorship’ (Apfelbaum, 2002:80) can tend to encourage workers to behave as if they were ‘deaf-mutes’ (Apfelbaum, 2002:80) by not speaking their real story, and moderating their words to what they perceive as acceptable. So, even though the law says you can speak up or refuse dangerous work, employees do not often take up this right because they know of the negative consequences (Wadick, 2009b). This foreclosure acts to

limit what can be thought and said, and thereby suppresses the expression of workers' perceptions of their situation. And the more one does it so as to legitimately participate, this performativity (Blumenfeld, et al., 2005:11) increasingly brings into being what it names. By saying only the sayable, one supports the status quo and the hegemonic relations of the employer/employee contract suffused in management prerogative. To disrupt this chain of foreclosures that is deeply rooted in a history of industrial conflict and mistrust is not straightforward. To take full advantage of the new requirement to consult, all workers need to learn a new, democratic way, which is problematic because immanent to democracy is the necessity to question authority and dissent appropriately (Becker & Couto, 1996:4).

Consultation fulfills a dual purpose – it helps managers pursue their goal of duty of care by hearing what workers have to say about what is actually happening at the workplace, and it can protect the separate interests of the workers by giving them a voice. And research from a variety of studies does demonstrate that consultation often, but not always, leads to better OHS outcomes (Blewett, 2001; Dwyer, 2000:171; Walters, Nichols, Connor, Tasiran, & Cam, 2005:x), although success is indexed to the presence of strong trade unions to support the process (Walters & Frick, 2000:45). However, as we have seen throughout the brief history of OHS, often the interests of workers and managers do not coincide and an important question for me to answer with this research is how can workers become involved to 'monitor and influence the pursuit of their OHS interests' (Walters & Frick, 2000:44).

The effectiveness of such participation will depend on how workers/OHS reps can formulate and speak up for their views on OHS (Wadick, 2009b; Walters & Frick, 2000:57). Traditionally, workers have not been encouraged to speak up – they have the knowledge, and they have views, but can/will they express them? They have been dissuaded in the past from speaking up; will they now trust that they can? Employers cannot suddenly create trust through a policy when they have not engendered trust through their actions (Covey, 1989:198).

Hale and Hovden (1988, in Shaw and Blewett, 2000:458), in a review of organisational features that are linked to superior OHS performance, found that



political and symbolic changes rather than bureaucratic or structural, have the greatest effect on OHS outcomes. Interventions that give permission to question the status quo are more likely to result in sustainable improvements because they reveal contingency and give confidence that things can change (Shaw and Blewett, 2000:458); they strengthen workplace relationships, build trust and redistribute power (Bolman and Deal, 1997, in Shaw and Blewett, 2000:458). Where participation has a narrow scope and workers low power, where they are only permitted to suggest minor changes, they opine on a limited range of themes and participation is at best symbolic (Dwyer:2000:169). OHS management that relies on top-down, hierarchical approaches are 'less than effective' (Shaw and Blewett, 2000:458) because they fail to address the key issues in improving OHS, namely power and control. A study in the UK by Walters et al (2005:xiii) suggests that for OHS consultation to be clearly effective in making the workplace safer, it needs to be situated within a 'continuum of participative activity rather than as distinct and exclusive arrangements'. That is, a democratic workplace.

The terms 'OHS consultation' and 'worker participation' are not unproblematic. They are a 'highly loaded frame of reference' (Ramsay, 1977:481), seething with meaning and wider interests. They are awash with unspoken agendas and steeped in history. Currently in Australia, the legal meaning of OHS consultation involves more than management giving relevant information to workers. It also requires giving workers the opportunity to present their views and then taking their views into account when making decisions that affect their health and safety. It stops short of insisting on implementing what employees want, leaving management prerogative intact. Hence, employee participation in OHS consultation involves cooperation but is not industrial democracy or power sharing (Markey & Patmore, 2009:42). In fact, Australian employers and their Anglo Saxon counterparts generally have not favoured models of employee participation if they involved loss of management prerogative or a strengthened union role, which are also hallmarks of our adversarial industrial relations system (Markey & Patmore, 2009:44).

This statutory duty to consult has created the situation where management very often take the initiative in setting up consultation arrangements. This may have limited success as these often overly simplistic managerialist prescriptions do not take into account worker understandings of trust and autonomy (Walters, et al., 2005:xiii), and workers may view the management led initiatives as spurious attempts for management to have its definitions of the situation accepted (Ramsay, 1977:485). It is often not the workers who define the agenda and this could be seen as an example of the top-down approach creating a system that may alienate workers and encourage lip-service at best. Once again we have separate discourses competing for truth, and competing for who can define truth and who's truth is heard, representing multiple emergent knowledges vying for legitimacy (Lather, 1991:11). On the one hand, traditionally, most worker participation has been positioned within a 'pluralist perspective of conflicting interests' (Walters and Nichols, 2007, in Taska, 2009:11) through trade unions demanding better conditions from resistant employers. Now, juxtaposed with this is the legal requirement that insists these same employers actively engage with the workers. Despite this statutory stipulation, the fundamental structure of the employer/employee relationship has not changed because employers still make the decisions and still allocate the resources. Current arrangements may merely reinforce management authority by inducing cooperation and legitimation (Ramsay, 1977:481-482) with the resultant loss of effectiveness.

Unfortunately, the preceding discussion reinforces, reifies and reveals the existence, at least in people's perceptions, of a boss versus worker binary and therefore provides little assistance with mapping a better and safer future, and does not help us develop a new way forward through a 'conversation of hope' (Somerville, 2007:234). The discussion demonstrates that the discourse of OHS has generated and/or reinforced certain binaries and forms of truth. It regulates and disciplines by establishing its own field of knowledge, by defining truth, constituting subjectivities in particular ways, positioning them within the discourse and subjecting them to normalizing judgements (Davies, 2006:78) so that the binaries seem normal, natural, and inherent. Is there a possibility to disrupt these binaries of the discourse and open subjectification to new possibilities?

We may be better placed if we can work out how to navigate between seemingly divergent interests to unfold a win-win for all workers by suspending the 'category maintenance work' (Davies, 2006:83) that aims to prevent the person from trying on a new and transformed identity. The rhetorical question 'what can you do!' denies the possibility of a new future. Yet it is in this performativity, this repetition of the same actions and the same responses, embodied in 'what can you do!', that the status quo is constantly reiterated. How can we find some discontinuities in the actions, some indeterminacy, to allow for identity and certainty to be interrupted (Atkins, 2005a:255)?

The dualistic and conflictual writings of much labour process theory (O'Doherty, 2009:2) masks possibilities of integrating worker health and safety with management prerogative. That is, the either-or binary presumption discourages attention to the relationship between the two dimensions (Taska, 2009:14), yet it is in the 'dynamic of this relationship that subjectivities are formed and transformed' (Somerville, 2007:234). New subjectivities and new knowledges may be generated from the 'space in between the binary (op)positions' (Somerville, 2007:236) of us versus them, of insider/outsider, of boss versus worker. 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 will require 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 & Bahnish, 2002:34).

How can the certainties of the self-other divide be challenged? Where can these new storylines come from? What will give them impetus and sustain them through their birthing, development and maturation? Contemporary legislation that requires employers to consult perhaps opens up such a liminal space of possibilities that invite all workers to participate. However, legislation has not shown how to do this, it has merely extended the invitation. Legislation has paved the way for new practices of freedom, but it does not ensure them. According to Foucault (Foucault, 2003a:26) 'the practice of liberation is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed'.

Workers will still need to be able to develop these new practices if they are to define and develop newer and safer workplaces. Can workers be confident that the rules of the game are changing such that they will be able to describe and produce new truths, their truths? Historically evidence suggests it will not be easy or unproblematic (Ramsay, 1977), especially if it remains within the existing structure of employer/employee relationships. However, research by Somerville (2006:50) into learning safety in the mining industry does conclude that the spaces opened up by changing company OHS discourse do offer new storylines and therefore new possibilities for developing worker OHS subjectivities.

The contemporary discourse of safety, largely driven by legislation, is not necessarily embraced by workers:

The suturing of a subject to a subject position is not a simple process of hailing a subject into place through the hierarchical or hegemonic operations of power (Scheeres & Solomon, 2006:89).

Workers themselves need to recognise the benefits to them and then actively invest their efforts into realigning their OHS subject position(s). It will require the remaking of work practices and work identities (Abrahamsson, 2006:106) which is not all simple and not without resistance (Abrahamsson, 2006:116).

A politics of hope can be generated in OHS discourse as long as rhetoric is accompanied by visible and relevant action. For example, a generally consultative management style at work does increase workers' positive experiences of consultation on health and safety (Walters, et al., 2005:xiv), while dominating and directive management styles usurp employee empowerment and commitment to OHS (Harper, et al., 1996:176). Nevertheless, large studies in the UK (Walters, et al., 2005) and Australia (NSW Government, 2007) found that the necessary preconditions for good OHS consultation were not often in evidence: 'it is disappointing that we did not find any evidence of world class consultation' (NSW Government, 2007:xiii). A separate study by Curtin University suggested that successful OHS management 'appears to be strongly dependent on factors external to the program' (Harper, et al., 1996:177). The critical contextual factors were demonstrated management commitment and

involvement in OHS, humanistic and friendly communication between management and employees, and close interpersonal contact between all levels of the workforce.

It may not be easy because the profound recasting of self-other relationships (Somerville, 2008:214) and making the new knowledge required necessitates questioning one's own subjectivity to the extent that 'we will come to inhabit and know the world differently than we did before' (Somerville, 2008:209). A new language will be required – the language and text used to describe the world helps 'confirm and bring that world into being' (O'Doherty, 2009:8), suggesting that rather than being objectively true, the reality described is dependent on its description: reality is textual (O'Doherty, 2009:9) and therefore amenable to change. The emphasis on language is highlighted in modern organisations in which workers are often required to speak up, to verbalise, to talk and write about the work they do and themselves as workers (Scheeres, 2003:332). This 'textualising of work' (Scheeres, 2003:332) is further reinforced by the requirement to consult with workers on OHS matters. They are now expected to become 'discourse workers' (Scheeres, 2003:332) as they take up these new work practices and new worker identities. This can be problematic, as, firstly, it is not always easy for workers to articulate their safety concerns (Gray, 2002:138), and secondly, they may be marginalised by their own workmates for doing so (Wadick, 2009b)

The truth telling or 'veridical discourse' (Rose, 1999:30) of OHS makes claims to the truths of the rational, scientific, exposure limits, numbers, quantitative risk assessments, and statistics. This has gained ascendancy despite research that questions their reliability: for example, in the 'politics of numbers' (Rose, 1999:199), the concepts of Lost Time Injury and workers compensation data get re-defined and change what is reportable. However, OHS is more than the technical-rational, it speaks of affect, ambition, aspiration and desire. Technical solutions are not enough because the human element puts OHS into the social arena (Shaw and Blewett, 2000:461).

Exhorting workers to behave more safely without addressing the sources of unsafe behaviour does not remove the problem (Johnstone, 2004:25). Factors

associated with lower injury rates are management concern for the workforce, participation in decision making, participative problem solving and workforce empowerment (Shaw and Blewett, 2000:461), and not written safety rules (Shaw and Blewett, 2000:462). Formal systems that do not take the people, their culture and symbols, and the political aspects of power and control have limited effect on improving consultation and workplace health and safety (Blewett, 2001). Legislation alone will not improve OHS outcomes, but may reinforce existing relationships of power and control as it encourages a management initiated plethora of “do’s and don’ts”.

The history of OHS has consistently relied on rules and procedures to ensure worker safety behaviours. Workers may be disempowered by these systems that focus on worker behaviour as the primary cause of accidents (Nichols & Tucker, 2000:305) because these systems do not give the employees power to modify employer behaviour (Walker, 1998 in Nichols and Tucker, 2000:305). It has been a history composed of strategies, technologies and devices ‘which seek to shape conduct so as to achieve certain ends’ (Rose, 1999:3). This type of discourse limits the capacity of workers to think otherwise. New OHS legislation (for example, NSW Government, 2000 and 2001) has opened possibilities for change, but management and employee practices that have developed under the regime of the old truth will have to change to achieve more than tokenism. OHS discourse has spawned ‘regimes of truth’ (Rose, 1999:19), ways of speaking truth, persons authorised to speak truths, ways of enacting these spoken truths, and the costs (personal and financial) of doing so. Its history represents the ‘dead weight of tradition, like a nightmare on the brain of the living’ (Rose, 1999:22), as Marx wrote. The truth of this discourse is that profit is always more important than safety, because profit is the *raison d’être* for the business – people come second. These ‘inscription practices’ (Rose, 1999:52) have become embodied and have many implications – management prerogative to tell workers what to do, lack of worker autonomy and decision making. Workers themselves support this truth with comments such as ‘what can you do!’, demonstrating that they know and accept the reality that work is damaging to their health, safety and welfare.

Contemporary OHS discourse places a very strong emphasis on documented OHS management systems, usually designed, written and implemented by management, with minimal input from employees. This has changed the term of inclusion for the workers by minimizing their embodied knowledge and privileging codified knowledge. Workers are therefore encouraged to see OHS issues in the way that management has defined them, and their capacity to develop their own perspective is not supported and may even be undermined,

## **Conclusion**

The history of OHS is complex, fractured, non linear and contradictory (Frick & Wren, 2000:41), yet some themes are more constant than others. There has been an underlying tension between the economic principles of capitalism, the obligations of governments to protect peoples, and the workers clamouring for a better deal. Workplaces in the western world are safer now than in the early days of the industrial revolution, but the tension still exists; capitalism is a powerful influence and costs and “bottom line” thinking still underpin our economic system. In the capitalist system of production there is a fundamental underlying conflict of interest between boss and worker (Creighton & Gunningham, 1985:4; Hopkins, 1993:183). Industry’s main goal is profit, and the workers main goal is survival. Workers are dependent on the employer for their job, which introduces the harsh reality of a power differential (Boyle, 1993:113-115; Carson, 1985:76; Williams, 1993:60). Often for workers their ‘margin of choice’ (Williams, 1993:70) is narrow, forcing unequal transactions and exchanges ‘in a web of power’ (Williams, 1993:70). ‘Structures of vulnerability’ (Nichols & Tucker, 2000:295) have been created by the decline in trade unions. Hence, health and safety concerns are likely to raise questions of control at the workplace, of how work is to be organised (Quinlan, 1993:143) and may even challenge the concept of management prerogative (Quinlan, 1993:143).

It is within this set of tensions that I have embarked on my research, with the aim of describing them. It is hoped that by doing this, strategic actions may be taken that can rebalance the tensions and create safer workplaces.

# Chapter 3 Methodology

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## Introduction

I begin this chapter by offering a personal story written as an essay to help consider how individuals undergo development of and changes to their subjectivity. I present this discussion because it relates to my research and my place in the research. I was inspired to include this piece of writing by Margaret Somerville's articulation of a new research methodology which she calls 'post modern emergence' (Somerville, 2007, 2008). She distinguishes this postmodern emergent methodology from the deconstruction of poststructural research because it changes the focus onto the generation of new knowledges. My story illustrates how my fractured self allowed for the disruption of taken-for-granted ways of interpreting the world and opened up to/created new knowledge in cathartic moments of becoming. This is relevant to my research because new knowledge is only created when old certainties are permitted to be challenged.

I then outline the theoretical underpinnings of the research methodology I use in this project and problematise how post structural thinking affects both the conduct of research and the research outcomes. Next I trace for you the data collection and analysis methods I used to try and capture the iterative, reflexive and hermeneutic nature of those processes. Finally I consider research(er) ethics, including gaining ethics approval for this project.

## Can a white fella breathe country?

*Subtitle: Relaxing boundary work*

In this piece I wish to explore how to disrupt 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.

I will now tell you a story of my own experiences of re-learning who I am and how I am in the world, a story of becoming subject. It is a story of disrupting binaries by interrupting and briefly stopping boundary work. It was not done consciously or with knowledge/understanding of the process. It is only in retrospect, with careful and sustained critical reflection, that I can help to make sense of it. It is a story of how I, as a white fella, learned to connect with country. It was not easy, linear or contrived, but a random and chaotic folding and

unfolding of emotional, affective, bodily and intellectual knowings. Therefore the reason for this unpicking is to try to distill the essential elements of my unlearning and re-learning for use by education.

In my early 20's I realised I was unhappy; I felt as though I did not belong in my world and that the 'system' that had conditioned and subsequently kept me in control was oppressive, unfair, limiting and plain wrong. I lost faith in many of the values instilled in me since birth. I lost faith in my country, my government, my church, and the bureaucratic machine of officialdom. Some people would say I rebelled and embarked on a journey of self discovery. It could be described as an unraveling of my subjectivity of who I thought I was. It was a slow motion mental, physical and emotional breakdown. I think, as an aside, the only thing that kept me from falling into a complete abyss of depression, subversion and sustained lawlessness was my family, who did not reject me despite me rejecting them.

During much of this time, I did not belong in traditional white Australian privileged society. Consequently, I moved in the shadows of the fringe, where boundaries were blurred or even nonexistent. I sat with vagabonds, kooris, derelicts – we were all detritus of the capitalist, colonial machine washed up at the high tide mark on the edges of respectability.

Increasingly this fringe place became the Australian bush – in the bush there was no conditioning, no expectations, only the raw elements of life: the cycles of nature, the wind, the rain, the animals, the ants, the terrain of creeks, hills, rocks and dirt. Sometimes hospitable and often inhospitable as its sharp and hard prickles spiked my frequently naked body.

Because I had nowhere else to go, it became my refuge. Even though I cried a lot as I railed against my perceived adversary, it always greeted me with open arms and gave me a safe place. When I could stop the tears, graced with a lucid moment not bounded by fear, hurt, longing or loathing, I would look up, out from myself, and I began to notice where I was. I learned to smell the water, hear the birds, read the clouds, listen to the sky. And I imagined, or I allowed my creative spirit to wonder things that before would be cauterized before they were given a

chance to even bud. I sensed I was not alone, that the natural world had a conscious awareness of me and my presence. I entertained the idea that the natural world was made of spirit beings who embodied the wind, and the storm. I imagined there was a real life energy in the flowing creeks, I thought I could feel the energy of life among the trees.

In my state of crumbling surveillance of my preconceptions, I allowed myself the space to wonder if this was true, if I could understand these spirits, or listen to them, or even exchange and commune with them. I remember a very particular place and space when this happened. It was a valley where I often camped under the stars, or, in a rough shelter of bark, sticks and leaves I made, I began to allow myself to notice the wind. I started to think the wind I felt actually belonged to that valley; then I noticed it come and go as it surveyed its territory. Every day it would come and check on me, we would greet each other, play around, and it would move on its sovereign way.

One day a storm was quickly brewing, and somehow I heard the wind say it had to hide – it found a safe place deep in the cleft at the head of the valley, and let the storm pass by. It had to hide from the storm or its power may blow this local wind far away from its dreaming home, it may get lost and not know how to return and would be forced to try to find a new home in a faraway and foreign land. It may even die, be torn apart and scattered too far and wide, impossible to re-group. I felt we made friends.

Am I mad, is it true, is this real knowledge or false? Was my embodied knowing a trick played by my mind in its irrational wanderings positioned by my self-exclusion and isolation? Perhaps I'll never know, but a koori man says my experience is consistent with what his people speak. They have it in their dreaming.

True or not, I don't care, it helped me change. Now I enjoy the wind on my body; I greet it and distinguish between a local wind and a world wind. Even if I am under deception, I cherish this knowing that I cannot measure, that I only feel and allow.

On another occasion, in this raw place and space in my life, I thought I could commune with nature, and I thought it a joke. I was irreverent; I am human, created in god's image, and I am more important than the stars. Ha. I still had things to learn.

A storm was passing nearby – fierce lightning striking out. In my haughty pride I yelled abuse, I called it names and I questioned its power and its purpose. I questioned its integrity, publicly, vociferously, and passionately. I stood there shouting and gesticulating my irreverence. To my surprise it stopped its movement away from me and answered back: "I'll show you, you idiot!", it said to me. It changed course, attacking me and mine. I beat a hasty retreat. I feared for my life, and apologized, loudly, passionately and vociferously, and begged its forgiveness. It softened its stance, threw a few shots to let me know it could punish me, then forgave me with a warning to be more respectful, to know my place, and then turned around to resume its previous course. I shook with fear and relief. It could have broken me like a twig, fried me to a crisp, but showed its kind disposition and gave me another chance. I had been propelled into the world of the abject, my imaginary borders disintegrating and identity disrupted (Pentony, 1996).

Conducting the research that is the subject of this thesis 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 'whitefella' story demonstrates to me the importance of body/place relations to safety and how the drive to safety is instinctual. Writing this 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. I wrote the story during a post-graduate students' spring school in which I allowed myself to drop into a deep trance-like place. Writing the story meant bridging two forms of consciousness, moving between the image in my memory, in my body, in my

cells, that is, the semiotic, and transferring this to the verbal, the text on paper, the symbolic (Somerville, 2004:53) – between the signified and the signifier.

This learning has been deep and is sustained. What can we distill, what lessons are there for learning and education? And how do I now continue to maintain this learning, even though I do not live in the bush, even though my life now bears little resemblance to those earlier ramblings and wanderings?

## **Researcher epistemology**

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 & 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, Gruber, & Lehner, 2006). Epistemological beliefs effect learning and problem solving and establish a context within which intellectual resources are accessed and used (Jehng, Johnson, & Anderson, 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, Festner, Gruber, Harteis, & Heid, 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 OHS. 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.

For example, I do not subscribe to the boss versus worker binary that I hear over and over again as both workers and managers rail against each other, their supervisors, and the system. All employees participate, perhaps unknowingly, in the capitalist discourse of production; all employees are caught up in the pressure created by contemporary accounting practices of "number crunching". My OHS perspective can appeal to the needs of all levels of workers for a healthy and safe workplace. Hence, my methodology is not designed to single out any particular category of worker, but will uncover how the discourse of OHS operates, where its contradictions lie, where the opportunities for change present themselves, and how people navigate through these competing pressures.

## **Research Methodology**

In this section I describe the methodological framework that informs my research and the methods I used for data collection and analysis.

OHS 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 OHS uses epidemiology (University of Newcastle, 2009), defined by the Macquarie Dictionary (Macquarie University, 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.

OHS has been viewed primarily as a technical and/or medical phenomenon which can be improved by better engineering and monitoring of worksites (Shannon, et al., 1997:201). 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 becomes subordinated to the dangerous processes. This body, our body, is objectified and commodified by OHS 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 \$26,000; loss of sight in one eye is worth \$40,000; loss of a toe (not big toe), is \$6,000 (NSW Government, 2009:56-57), and so on, our bodies defined in economic terms, measured against their usefulness, to us and to production.

Since the 1950's knowledge and understanding of the causes of work related disease and disability have grown dramatically (Goldenhar & Goldenhar, 1994:763). The positivist research embraced by scientific epidemiological studies, with measurements and statistics, assumes that these quantifiable results represent the truth, and an instrumental rational thinking presumes the uncovering of these truths will automatically and unproblematically lead to safer workplaces. 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 OHS. Research on the application of the etiological knowledge and on ways to conduct OHS research is sparse (Goldenhar & Goldenhar, 1994:763). Even so, this scientific model of OHS management and research has made great strides in improving worker health and safety. My efforts to engage in a critical understanding of OHS through an examination of the development of OHS subjectivities does not imply that the technical and problem solving orientation is worthless (Alvesson & Wilmott, 1996:4). No, rather, I welcome the forging of closer links between the two. However, Sauri (1990, in Shannon, et al., 1997:202) has suggested that after a certain point, technology cannot achieve further improvements in safety; rather, organisational and cultural factors may be important – yet these have not been widely explored (Shannon, et al., 1997:202). Carr and Kemmis (1986, in Cowley, 2006:100) suggest that subjective and social factors play a crucial role in the production of knowledge, and that knowledge also needs to be understood in psychological and sociological terms rather than as being purely technical and objective.

Shannon et al (1999) document the dearth and mediocre quality of studies evaluating OHS interventions. Goldenhar and Goldenhar (1994:764) suggest that lack of sound evidence from such studies should not be viewed as a negative assessment of their potential, but an opportunity to develop new research that can add new evidence for both academics and practitioners concerning various aspects of OHS. Needleman and Needleman (1996, in Baril-Gingras, Bellemare, & Brun, 2006:852) provide rich insights on the use of qualitative methods for such research, and Shannon et al (1999) and Goldenhar and Goldenhar (1994) recommend collecting qualitative information as part of OHS studies. Foucault (1994) suggests that if we want to open up discourse so as to challenge its problems, the researcher needs to go beyond textual, academic or scholarly research. Rather, one of the primary forms of data is collaboration with non-experts by 'listening to their problems and working with them to formulate these problems' (Foucault, 1994:285).



The literature review in chapter 2 showed that many OHS initiatives represent a top-down approach led by management, often with the goal of reducing liability and costs. Goldenhar and Goldenhar (1994:772) in a review of OHS intervention research add another dimension to this, finding many interventions ‘usually involved researchers approaching a company and imposing their study on the workforce’. The preservation and enhancement of individual and personal bodies occurs at best obliquely and as a tangential consequence. Very few, apart from unions demanding better conditions, have been driven by workers ‘on the shop floor’ (Berger, 1999). My research describes the OHS perceptions of workers from all levels of status in the workplace hierarchy with the hope that by opening them up to view it may be possible to design different kinds of interventions that may help make workplaces safer.

Poststructuralism problematises truth as partial, identity as fluid, language as an unclear referent system, and method and criteria as potentially coercive (Guba and Lincoln, 2005:203). It alerts us to the problems of collecting and reporting data and to theoretical, empirical, aesthetic and ethical challenges in research (Richardson, 2000a:253). “Data” is not objective and transparent evidence of the real (Davies, 2004:4). For instance, stories do not reveal underlying truth but the way a person is making sense of their lived experiences at that moment. The person telling the story becomes the intermediary between what they perceived and the listener, the researcher. Their words are imperfect signs and symbols that represent their real; they are representations, open to many understandings and are not innocent (Davies, 2004:5; Richardson, 2002:415). They have a political purpose, they are used to push an agenda – they are often used as a source of empowerment and a form of resistance ‘to counter the domination of canonical discourses’ (Bochner, 2000:271). Even though data may not be revered as being the real truth, the language used may be deconstructed and prised/teased open to show the ways that the person constructs their real (Davies, 2004:5).

Beginning from this starting point, how can I hope to achieve worthwhile research that has any relevance? In this and subsequent sections I outline my methodology and my methods for data collection and analysis, and demonstrate

that with careful researcher reflexivity, useful empirical research can be conducted that will describe certain aspects of the world as they are experienced by human subjects. Whereas quantitative research stresses statistics and correlations, I am interested in how people understand their lives, what meanings they attach to their experiences, and how these influence the decisions and actions they take.

I am using an interpretive, hermeneutic framework within a post positivist paradigm of poststructural theories of meaning making and subject formation. I am interested in how the participants construct themselves in relation to OHS as a category demanded of them (Lather, 2007:40). My methodology is therefore influenced by Foucauldian and poststructuralist understandings of language, meaning, truth, discourse, subjectivity, power and knowledge. I use qualitative ethnographic methods for data collection such as interviews, participant observations, field notes, document analysis and researcher reflections. The main type of data I have collected are in the form of people's stories, with the purpose of understanding how they experience OHS at their workplaces.

Data analysis is informed by Foucauldian and poststructuralist understandings of agency in which people are not freely agentic but think and act within the choices offered by discourse. Bronwyn Davies (Davies, 2000: 65-68) explains: each person speaks/acts from the positions made available to them within the discourses in which they live and work. People learn to interact with the world of discourse in certain ways, and it is difficult to speak or act in ways that disrupt these discourses enough to create new subject positions. In a poststructural framework, agency can be thought of as having three elements: the discursive constitution of particular individuals as having access to a subject position that defines their right to speak and be heard; the discursive constitution of each person as author of their own meanings and desires; and a sense of one's self as being able to break out of the bounds of such discourse to forge something new, to imagine otherwise.

Hence, agency is not freedom from the influence of discourse, but the capacity to recognise the discourse and to resist, subvert and challenge it. Without this understanding, humanist agency in which the subject makes free decisions

based on their self-authorised knowledge of the world, is mere stylized repetition of the acts that are permitted in the discourse, a performativity that perpetuates the status quo (Butler, 2006:61). In this thesis I use the term agency to represent a counter force to the hegemonic forms of power capable of disrupting them. The challenge I face both in my research study and in my work as an OHS trainer and consultant is, knowing that workers are caught in complex webs of contradiction within which they cannot act as free agents to keep their bodies safe, identifying and mobilizing where the possibilities of agency are for these workers.

So, what methodological approaches can I use if I let poststructural thinking serve as the impetus for a destabilizing understanding of OHS discourse? My main analytic tool is the study of the processes whereby various kinds of storylines and their associated subject positions are constituted (Sondergaard, 2002:191). We know the world through the stories we are told about it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b:641). Stories stress the interplay of what is happening and how it is happening, how the participants do things and how they see things (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005:493).

The term “storyline” refers to a course of events and/or a sequence of actions that create identities through inclusive and exclusive movements (Sondergaard, 2002:191). Organisational stories consist of at least two elements: the narrative description of events and a set of meanings or interpretations. Both these elements may vary depending on who is telling the story, the audience and the context (Martin, 2002a:71). The story in the storyline may be oral or written and may be heard during fieldwork, an interview or a naturally occurring conversation (Chase, 2005:652). Using storylines allows for a Foucauldian discourse analytic approach concerned with the construction of subjects within varying forms of power/knowledge, and may help describe how different discourses ‘are laminated onto each other’ (Silverman, 2005:53-54). A Foucauldian analysis will attempt to ‘unsettle’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005:500) discursive realities to reveal how they are constituted.

## **Methods**

Poststructuralism problematises the concept of “data”; poststructural theory understands that objective truth cannot be established because there is always conflicting versions about what happened (Angrosino, 2005:731). There are many parts to truth with many perspectives, and none can claim exclusive privilege to its representation (Angrosino, 2005:731). Hence, when I use the terms “data” and “data collection” in this thesis I wish to affirm that I am not claiming it as truth that can be gathered and clearly categorised, but as a form of empirical evidence produced through the interactions between researcher and participant.

Although this section appears to demonstrate that I have designed my research methods for data collection and analysis beforehand, I wish to make the caveat that my initial design had built in flexibility to account for new or unexpected empirical materials. I wanted to be able to use an iterative process to allow for ‘growing sophistication’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a:376) as I concurrently collected and analysed data. I also make a note here that as a researcher, a subject, a person, I necessarily interacted with participants, not as an objective observer, but more as an ‘accomplice’ (Markham, 2005:802), co-constructing stories.

## **Data production**

I chose to use data for my research that was produced during the following encounters: OHS courses that I teach, semi-structured in depth interviews, and analysis of a wide array of documents. Interestingly, as my research progressed and various people asked me about it, they often responded in an impromptu fashion with their own stories close to their hearts – this could be on a street corner, in a shop, or in either of our homes. I started recording these stories from memory and use these as data, or grist for my analytic mill. The reasons for using the above techniques are mainly pragmatic – I had ready access to them, and this ‘purposive sampling’ (Silverman, 2005:129) provided more than enough information to represent many points of view.

There is another form of data, and I am not sure if it fits into data collection or data analysis, or spans both. It does not really matter, as it can sit in both camps. This is supported by Robson (1997, in Cowley, 2006:100) who suggests that in the interpretive approach to research, theories and concepts tend to arise from the enquiry and therefore data collection and analysis are not rigidly separated. I am referring above to my own writing, which I have come to realise as I write my thesis and while I was writing up associated research for a safety conference, is a powerful form of creating new knowledge. Through my writing I am forced to articulate ideas that often sit at the intersection of disparate strands (Somerville, 2004:61) of OHS discourse; the writing seems to open up a powerful coalescence.

I understand more clearly now, through engaging in the critical reflection and synthesising that this writing forces upon me, that I am always on the lookout for contradictions, for meaning, for hiatuses in research participants' stories, and I focus on contests between signifier, signified and meaning. Laurel Richardson considers writing as a '*method of inquiry*' (Richardson, 2000b:923) that the researcher/writer uses to help with discovery and analysis. By writing, I engage in the observation of my participation (Tedlock, 2005:474) and seek to understand how I influence the layering and unfolding of stories.

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).

Perhaps, as Derrida (1978, in O'Doherty, 2009:11) suggests, to an extent I actually become a 'contingent and undecidable *effect* of writing' as the writing writes me. The writing integrates multiple discourses within me; it is the catalyst

that helps me, as I, the pupa, the inquirer, the beginning researcher, emerge from my chrysalis of unknowing and move towards a fuller knowing. The new knowledge that I create, the learning that I achieve is not reached lightly, it does not just flow effortlessly as water flows when turning on the tap. The writing happens slowly, methodically, and is constructed by allowing ideas to wash over me – the words of the people who tell me their stories, the texts that I read in the literature and my reactions to these, coming from a place of my embodied knowing.

I use various methods or techniques to lubricate the writing, including staring out the window from my desk to exercise my focal length and enjoy some winter sun. However, one of my constant companions to my learning is what I call my “lay downs”. When ideas are swirling or are dead and I am self-aware of this, I go and lay down for a while, still my mind, still my body and allow a process to happen – allow the ‘little grey cells to do their work’, as Hercule Poirot, an Agatha Christie character, might say. This can take me to a deep place where the concepts, abstractions, images, thoughts, theories, views, impressions, feelings and ideas get a chance to play. In this playful state, without the pressure imposed by trying, or bending them to my will, they seek each other out, look for friends, make connections. Cognitively we may call it “analyse and synthesise”, but they call it play and have fun. Like a child who does not care, has no agenda but enjoys the moment of allowing creation to channel through.

Often in these lay-downs I go very deep inside, forgetting who I am, why I am there, what I am doing, as the play fills all of (un)consciousness. Often in this profound and mysterious place the relationships between the ideas seem so clear, rarely linear, but multiply connected. I actually see them with my inner eye and I want to draw them, sketch them out ...but alas, as I surface to consciousness and regain the me that I briefly put aside, these great understandings are no longer so clear, the connections fade away. So then I return to my desk and try to access them, I try to write them out of me; sometimes with great success, and sometimes not. This is what writing as a method of inquiry means to me.

An example of such an insight that came to me during a lay-down and I accessed soon enough afterwards to capture its intent is the following question: *To what extent do workers learn to enact an agentic subject position that disrupts the hegemony of costs and production over safety?* This question captured my dilemma – OHS is fuelled by legislation and it has a life of its own that is almost separate from workers' desires to keep their bodies safe. My research was spawned by the regular protestations that OHS was not about keeping them safe but was more about rules to protect employers from liability. An overwhelming number of workers I have met through my OHS work complain that OHS has a hidden agenda of making profits for such people as lawyers, insurance companies, the OHS industry, and even the regulator (Wadick, 2005). Many of these workers believe that OHS is more about slowing them down and costing them more, with little perceived reward.

It is often after these lay-downs that my creative urge leaks out in the form of a poem, a story, a cartoon or a play. These are my attempts to somehow, metaphorically, capture the connections and this is why I include them scattered throughout this thesis. Tedlock (2005:470) suggests that drama is a powerful way to show constructions in action, as plays can 'shape and enact moral texts that communicate vibrant emotional portraits of human beings'. Drama has the potential to capture something of the production of multiple, dynamic and shifting subjectivities, or at least to shed light on subject formation in complex and contradictory circumstances. These creative outpourings are an integral part of my inquiry process throughout this research. They try to allegorically or figuratively portray some essences or storylines within the stories I hear; I believe they have the ability to teach by appealing to peoples' sense of what is. Using metaphor invites my audience to see the world anew by (re)organising perceptions and emphasising particular details (Barrett & Cooperrider, 2001). I have performed both the poem presented in Chapter 1 and the play presented in Chapter 7 of this thesis to various groups and find that people relate personally to the concepts I explore when I use their words. Perhaps it is because the text and/or its performance spark the link for people between writing and politics, where 'politics' perhaps signifies the complex and dynamic operations of power

in the Foucauldian sense, the way we as becoming subjects are constituted but also constitute our worlds in the infinite minutiae of daily actions.

Writing is not an innocent practice (Denzin, 2000:256; Richardson, 2002:415); Clough (2000:278) makes the point that experimental ethnographic writing is strongly linked to political contentions over questions of knowledge. My writing gives voice to the shadow discourse of OHS, to those mutterings and resistances I hear so much of. I would hope that my creations help the reader or listener to 'understand and feel the phenomena under scrutiny' (Bochner, 2000:270). It allows the unofficial, the unheard, to be made visible and supports those who air the contraindications; it challenges the hegemonic discourse by putting peoples' lived experiences in the spotlight. Each time I represent research in these ways, new insights emerge by opening up and disrupting taken-for-granted ways of interpreting the world (Somerville, 2007:226).

### **OHS courses**

I conduct many types of OHS courses for many businesses, and I am expected to keep information I hear at these events as "commercial in confidence". My courses range from 1 hour to 4 days, and they are for many types of businesses across a wide range of industries. I have no particular connection with any organisation as I am a self employed contractor selling my services to whomever is willing to pay my price. I feel as though I have no leverage with any of these businesses to ask to conduct OHS research at their workplace – the gatekeepers and layers of decision making are too many.

The training environment is not neutral but is politically infused with power. Firstly, legislation has defined OHS and determined much training content. Secondly, I represent the powerful OHS authority of WorkCover and the courts, I am authorised by them to deliver their course and I am a so-called expert in the field ostensibly at the course to educate the students in what they need to know. Thirdly, the students must attend the course to satisfy their employment contract and OHS role, yet they usually have a wealth of OHS experience and tacit, local and practical knowledge born of praxis. So, we all walk into this seething, fermenting environment, positioning ourselves to ensure our safety and security.



I, as a 'technician(s) of behaviour' (Foucault, 1986b:235), can gain the trust of most people who come to my courses by treating them with respect; I demonstrate this by listening to their stories and by using their knowledge and experience as my starting point. I never reject or underestimate their knowledge gained from lived experience (Freire, 1994:84). When they trust that it is safe, they reveal their secrets, their often 'subjugated knowledge...buried under dominant forms of knowledge' (Danaher, et al., 2000:103). They deconstruct their status quo, and I use this as data. I do not pretend that this information is a complete picture of some authentic reality, it is partial; taking this into account, I 'delight in the particular phenomena that it allows [me] ...to explore' (Silverman, 2005:122).

I used the following strategies to gather data from courses:

#### *Background Information*

I have been conducting OHS training for approximately 9 years, most of which time I have been passionate about improving OHS for all workers, from front line staff to senior management. I have been collecting information from courses that is providing me with background information and helping me define the parameters of my research. For example, I have approximately 1000 course evaluation sheets that I have collated for themes, and use these to improve course content and process, and learn what issues are important for workers.

#### *Written questionnaires*

For the last couple of years, as part of this research project, I have given out a semi-structured questionnaire consisting of 5 open ended questions inviting a written response, to gather opinions on how workers perceive OHS and its implementation at their workplace (See Appendix A for a copy of this questionnaire). 52 people filled these out and returned them for me to use as data. There is no way that individual people or businesses can be identified from these responses. This preliminary information has helped me understand people's meaningful 'categories' (Silverman, 2005:111) for understanding OHS. I present and analyse this data in Chapter 4.

### *Classroom discussion groups*

I have also gathered collectively written responses from 45 small group discussion groups that answered the 3 questions: What safe things do workers at your workplace do? What unsafe things do they do? Why do they do unsafe things?

I presented a paper at The Safety Conference Sydney 2008 at which approximately 120 people attended. During this presentation I organised two small group discussion segments in which the participants divided themselves into 31 small groups, answered the questions in 2 separate exercises (see appendix B), and handed back their written responses for use in this research.

In two other types of classes I collected 50 written responses to 7 questions about various aspects of how OHS is managed at a particular workplace. Because of commercial in confidence and ethical considerations I cannot show you these questions in case they may indicate the name of the client.

I have collected 37 completed safety observation cards/forms that employees from a certain company are required by management to conduct and fill out once per month. The process involves an employee watching another, or others, perform a work task, talking to them about the health and safety aspects of the task, provide written answers to the questions on the form, and submit to management as part of their kpi's.

I present and analyse these written forms of data in chapter 4, with the written questionnaires.

### *Participant observations and field notes*

By participant observations in this section I am referring to myself as a participant observer in the courses that I teach. I have limited access to workplaces for observations as such; I do conduct workplace observations in the form of workplace inspections as part of a course that I am running. I believe that the information that I gain from courses is culturally rich in 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973:27) and possibly more naturalistic than interviews because it is very often based on participant-led discussion rather than trainer-led questions

or lectures. Once the participants have developed a sense of security and trust they reveal things that they would not have previously imagined they would. The information gleaned from courses underpins my ability to conduct meaningful interviews.

Because of gatekeeping and ethical considerations I decided not to tape record my courses, although I would have loved to be able to do this because so many people tell so many very interesting OHS stories about their experiences at work. The complexity of workers from so many different industries and workplaces would have made gaining permission from all the gatekeepers a herculean task. Perhaps another time I will be afforded this pleasure. I am limited to what information I can use from the stories I hear at courses, but I am allowed to reflect on these stories. To achieve this I record stories after each day, and sometimes during the day by writing the stories from memory, including class discussions that arose from the stories. A useful method I have found is to tape record my reflections while I am driving home after the course, and then transcribe these. I was not able to capture the verbatim accounts with all their rich detail, but I could at least reflect on many aspects of the day including people's interactions, body language, asides in the breaks and some of the stories. I use the information gathered in this way as data for this research.

In writing these field notes, I am not simply recording data as I remembered it, I am concurrently analysing it as well – I play with my perceptions of it, and this play acts as a filter that reflects my beliefs about the world (ontology) and my beliefs about what constitutes relevant knowledge (epistemology) because I choose to record some things over others (Silverman, 2005:158).

I pay particular attention to the 4 day OHS consultation courses that I conduct because the group gets a chance to bond and to build enough trust to be willing to share personally meaningful information – these 4 day courses yield rich data. Out of all the courses I run, this is the one that people usually want to come to (rather than are forced to come) – they are already interested in OHS, have already had significant OHS experiences, and are or will be on the OHS committee. Not only that, but I, as teacher, have an opportunity to build rapport with the group and they learn to feel safe enough to disclose deep personal

feelings. However, at this point I need to acknowledge my influence on this process. Because of who I am, my history and how I position my own subjectivity in regards to OHS and OHS teaching, I necessarily influence the unfolding of the courses. For instance, I listen to students' stories with intense interest, I remember them and I refer back to them during the training. My inquisitive nature about the problems people face with OHS has the impact of encouraging students to find their voice, to utter things that have been secret – my influence helps them to avoid being the dummy who articulates hollow organisational rhetoric.

## **Interviews**

I conducted, recorded and transcribed verbatim 16 in depth (approx 1-1 ½ hour each) semi structured interviews with workers. Interviewees were recruited by various means. At the end of each OHS consultation course I passed around a form that invited people to allow me to interview them and they could give their contact details for me to follow up at a later date. I stressed that this was purely voluntary. To counteract any perceived power imbalances between myself and the interviewees, this request was made after each participant had passed the course and received their certificate – they did not feel pressured to acquiesce by having their participation in the research indexed to passing the course. This process yielded only 3 participants. Another was recruited at the conference presentation, when, at the end of the presentation, I outlined my research and asked for volunteers. Two more volunteered from an OHS e-network that I belong to; I knew one other participant through my PhD studies, one I contacted because he won a state OHS award, and the rest (8) were already known to me and were happy to be a part of the research. In fact, many of these suggested that they participate.

The range of people who I interviewed represented a very diverse range of industries, ages, genders and positions in the organisations for which they worked. I did not filter them based on any pre-set criteria developed by myself, although I did ask one of the people to participate because I thought his opinions and experiences would be very interesting for the research. I felt that he may present a 'deviant case' (Silverman, 2005:133) of 'counter narratives' (Andrews,

Day Slater, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2004:109) that would test my understanding that OHS offers an opportunity for people to position themselves as effective OHS subjects. He has what I would loosely call a negative attitude to OHS, which I hoped would help me explore counter intuitive ideas that are either not mentioned or contra indicated in the literature (Silverman, 2005:65).

In framing my research I have been careful not to reproduce and reinforce instrumental values to avoid framing the norms of current OHS and business practice as natural and self-evident guidelines. To help me do this I look for 'surprises' (Alvesson, 2002:130) in my data – things that are different to what I might expect, such as participants disagreeing with my normative suggestions. This may help me represent OHS discourse in its multi-faceted dimensions by including ideas from the margins (Guba and Lincoln, 2005:211) that challenge the bounded world described in much OHS literature. Here I am influenced by my poststructuralist theoretical framework that 'search[es] out and experiment[s] with narratives that expand the range of understanding, voice and storied variations in human existence' (Guba and Lincoln, 2005:211). These voices may reveal the underlying tensions and contradiction in OHS discourse.

Why use interviews? Many research commentators suggest that we live in an 'interview society' (Chase, 2005:661; Fontana & Frey, 2005:698; Rapley, 2004) in which interviews are central to making sense of lives: for example, news interviews, talk shows and documentaries. The face-to-face interview is presented as enabling a 'special insight' into subjectivity, voice and lived experience (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997 in Rapley, 2004:15). Although many of these interviews are general in the information they elicit (Chase, 2005:661), and qualitative research interviews seek for in depth information about the particular, people may be comfortable participating in something that is part of our culture.

Much OHS research is concerned with statistics and correlations, whereas I am more interested in the meaning people ascribe to their world. Hence, interviews offer the opportunity to explore these multiple meanings made visible in the stories people tell. However, interviews are not a neutral, unproblematic method of gathering data because the interview occurs as a conversation between two

people who collaborate and thereby influence its direction, content and outcomes (Fontana and Frey, 2005:696). That is, it is negotiated, mutually co-created and constructed (Fontana & Frey, 2005:717).

A modernist epistemology of interviewing might suggest there is a core of knowledge that can be accessed through proper technique and minimum interference. However, a poststructural approach sees that reality is an ongoing interpretation (Fontana & Frey, 2005:717) in which truth and meaning slide and elide, depending on stance and positioning. For example, interviewees may sometimes respond to the interviewer by using familiar discursively dictated narrative constructs rather than providing meaningful insights into their subjective view (Miller & Glassner, 2004:127). Alternatively, interviewees may focus on a particular meaning that they think the researcher is looking for (Silverman, 2005:45) because they perceive the interviewer as being in a position of power.

I, as the interviewer, am in a privileged position of power and authority. I organise the interview and bring with me certain technologies of power. Power is not necessarily human (Clegg, 1994:35); for example, my tape recorder itself is not neutral (Angrosino, 2005:742). It could be perceived as a technology or artefact of power, or an instrument of violence by some people. Foucault's understanding of power suggests it comprises a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application and targets which form 'a "physics" or an "anatomy" of power, a technology' (Foucault, 1986e:206) that can be associated with surveillance at the local level (Foucault, 1980f:71). So I, the interviewer, as a representative of OHS discourse, ask people to participate in my project, and then I capture their voices permanently on tape, at least until I destroy the tapes after 5 years as per Ethics clearance. They are now recorded. My actions of controlling the interview and research processes bring the status quo of power relations into play, they reinforce the top-down approach of labour relations and OHS management. Even though I invite participation and I espouse the confidential, it is driven by me and I represent the powerful bureaucracy. However, the corollary of power is resistance, and interviewees

may exert their own power as resistance by misbehaving, withholding information or lying to me.

Organising and conducting interviews is a political process that involves ethical considerations on many levels. Interviewing is 'historically and contextually bound' (Fontana & Frey, 2005:695) and is therefore not neutral or objective. For example, the interview participants are all volunteers which means certain issues need addressing. One is whether there is informed consent from each. That is, do these volunteers have tolerable choices, adequate information, and the capacity to know what is in their best interest (Goldenhar & Goldenhar, 1994:771)? I do not want to appear to be coercing potential participants. I am asking them to do me a favour by consenting to be interviewed. They only sometimes ask me if they can be interviewed. Consequently I have to be careful that when trying to organise a time and place for the interview I do not seem to be badgering them to give of their time. When I email a participant pack to each participant I must make sure that I do not send it to the wrong person, and I must ensure that the identity of all interviewees remains confidential.

Brinkermann (2007) proposes a Socratic, epistemic, form of interviewing in which both participants in the conversation are equal persons with equal rights, and both can construct knowledge in the process. It is not just the interviewer who challenges the interviewee to justify their responses, but often the interviewer can be challenged. Socratic dialogue invites people to question assumptions, including those about authority (Becker & Couto, 1996:6), and in this case, my authority as researcher. However, genuine participative discussion is possible only to the degree that mutual trust and respect prevail (Hernan, 1996:58); the advantage for research is that these participatory strategies are generally more truth generating (Hernan, 1996:58). For example, as a representative of the powerful OHS bureaucracy, I can be challenged to justify how compliance with OHS paperwork requirements actually makes the workplace safer. If I am willing to be challenged, and I respond honestly and ethically, with integrity, the interviewee is more likely to willingly embrace a challenge. We must remember that the interviewee is a volunteer and can leave at any time – and they may avail themselves of this right if they suspect we are

not honest. Or, worse still, they may feed us uncontested (and inaccurate) information to keep the peace. Creating an equal partnership helps to counteract and make transparent the power relations inherent in the interviewing situation.

Brinkermann (2007) is suggesting to include these epistemic style of interviewing techniques into the 'toolbox' (Brinkermann 2007: 1135) of qualitative inquiry – in addition to the 'phenomenological, descriptive, lifeworld interviews that focus on experiences and opinions' (Brinkermann 2007: 1135). The Socratic goal is not just to seek opinions and experiences, but 'to bring human beings from a state of being opinionated to a state of knowing' (Brinkermann 2007: 1135). In this style of interviewing, the interviewer does not just elicit the 'narrative of the individual's life or his or her experiences but rather people's epistemic practice of justification' (Brinkermann 2007: 1128).

### **Textual review**

I analyse such texts and documents as OHS journals, newsletters, a cross section of safety magazines from employer groups, trade unions and my professional association, OHS management systems, workplace documents, conference proceedings, and the texts that are written at my courses. I read these texts to ascertain several things: who they are written by, their content, their purpose, their conditions of use, their intended audience, the language(s) they use, and whose interests they represent. I use this method to help me understand the participants categories and see how these categories are used in concrete activities such as telling stories. Documents and texts are limited in their use as they are not transparent representations of organisational routines or decision making processes (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004:58). However, they are a good complement to my other data, but not a substitute.

### **Data analysis**

For data analysis, I used the traditional research methods of iteratively and concurrently gathering the data, studying and reviewing it, and coding it into themes. The reflexive nature of this system allowed for refinement in the data gathering process as emerging themes inform interview questions and permit the researcher to seek clarification from future participants. It must be



remembered that no data source is neutral, it is necessarily partial (Silverman, 2005:51) and there are multiple phenomena available in any research setting, and only some chosen as data. Hence, I not only wait for themes to emerge but also actively seek things that I already had noticed through my work and research as significant in the process of developing subjectivities within OHS discourse.

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, 2002a:76). I look for taken-for-granted ideas and actions as well as such processes as discursive inclusion and exclusion practices (Sondergaard, 2002:189), and how these are constituted. For example, how has OHS 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 OHS 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 poststructural analysis has been carried out on the stories from interviews and courses. This aims to deconstruct the stories people tell to try and understand how their subjectivity is constituted within and by the discourse of OHS. Concepts from poststructuralism such as power, knowledge, truth, subjectivity, language, meaning, and discourse frame the questions I ask myself when analysing this form of data. I have found that this has been a challenging skill to learn as I have been brought up and educated in a Western, Cartesian, humanist and modernist paradigm. However, with effort, reflection, research and reflexivity, I have endeavoured to open my eyes and heart to looking beyond the ostensible, the apparent and the professed in search of the forces that have given rise to the utterances of such claims.

## **Ethics**

Ethics approval was sought and gained from the university ethics committee, although it was not forthcoming at first application. The ethics committee wondered if asking students at my courses to allow me to interview them would be an unacceptable use of my power to leverage their participation. This forced me to reflexively examine how I would overcome this. The answer that I arrived at, and which they accepted, was to ensure that the course was over before I

asked for their involvement, and that I would stress to the potential participants that involvement was entirely voluntary.

To gain approval, and so as to ensure participants could make informed choices, I designed and produced a participant information pack (see appendix C) which contained an explanatory statement describing the research, their involvement, confidentiality and complaints procedure. It also included a consent form for them to sign, and some sample questions that may be used in the interview. Not one person refused to participate after receiving this pack.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have presented a discussion of the research methodology employed in this project. I began with a piece of writing to demonstrate how I created new knowledge through very personal research which allowed my rupturing self to disrupt my preconceptions and open up to new learning. I then reflexively considered how my researcher ontology and epistemology needs to be accounted for as it is a part of the research process. This was followed by detailed explanations of the rationale for and execution of the methods used to collect and analyse data. I am using an interpretive framework situated within a poststructural paradigm that privileges language, meaning, subjectivity, discourse and truth, and power and knowledge.

Data was produced, reflected on and recorded during and after OHS courses, through semi-structured interviews, document analysis and my own reflections and writing. Written data in the form of class evaluations, questionnaires, and discussion group responses was obtained from a variety of courses, but the majority of data was co-constructed during interviews, both formal and informal. Data was analysed by merging deconstruction of stories with a post modern emergent approach designed to allow for new and emergent knowledge to create new meaning and point to some possible ways forward in the wanderings constituted in improving health and safety at work.

# Chapter 4 Exploring some themes

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## Introduction

In this chapter I present and analyse results of written questionnaires that were handed out by the researcher and filled in by participants at different types of courses and presentations that I have conducted. I integrate into this analysis some stories and comments told by participants at those courses. I then begin to pick apart some of the threads that weave, not so much like an ordered piece of fabric, but more like a dreadlock of random and multiple interconnections that constitute the complex arrangements between OHS subjectivity, power and agency. Chapters 5 and 6 present, analyse and discuss data generated mainly from formal and informal interviews, and stories told at courses that I coordinated, while Chapter 7 presents data using the words of the participants put into the form of a play that can be performed.

## OHS courses

I firstly problematise OHS training by stating that OHS courses are not simply opportunities for participants to learn knowledge and truth. As has been discussed already, OHS discourse is a regime of truth constituted by its own definitions, with a logic which legitimates itself (Jackson & Carter, 1998:49); it is not necessarily absolutely true nor are the so-called truths uncontested. OHS courses consist of knowledge derived not so much from workplaces but from elsewhere, from stakeholders often external to the course participants' workplaces. To learn and implement this knowledge, people are required 'to bring forth their subjectivities for disciplining, to become a particular type of person' (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006:183). That is, they are being asked to actively become subject to a particular regime of truth and they are entreated to do this in exchange for the paternalistic promise that it will be good for them, it will improve their health and safety outcomes.

I have been conducting OHS courses for many years and the consistent storylines I hear convinced and motivated me to undertake this research project.

This PhD, while similar in some respects to other research I have conducted, is different in that it is more rigorous and self reflexive, as I not only admit, but embrace, my part in it. For example, my training style encourages participants to speak many heretofore hidden thoughts and feelings. By 'hidden' I mean these workers rarely utter certain and particular thoughts in the presence of those who design, develop, deliver and/or enforce the truth games of official OHS discourse. They generally keep their thoughts, feelings and perceptions private, or at least express them only when in the safe company of their perceived allies – their workmates. During my courses they learn to trust me enough to form another kind of alliance with me, even though I am not their workmate. Initially they may be hesitant to expose their soul because I could be just one more person representing the other, the normalising gaze of surveillance that seeks to control them. But I listen, I care, I try to understand, and I collaborate with them on looking for ways for them to interrupt the “liability” component of the discourse and foster the “health, safety and welfare” part. Together we encourage each others’ agency, understanding ‘agency’ as the ability to recognise and challenge the hegemony of the discourse in question.

A difficulty all workers have with developing their OHS subjectivity is that, as has been demonstrated in earlier chapters, OHS discourse is constituted within adversarial binaries – workers versus bosses, trade unions versus employers, employers versus government, all encouraging an “us versus them” mindset. Once the course participants decide that I am not really the “them”, and I am more like the “us”, then they reveal their secrets to me. As I write this I realise this is why they like my courses, why they are inspired, why they leave the training with a renewed zest for improving the health, safety and welfare at their workplace.

The training takes place in specific venues with particular institutional negotiations and spatial arrangements and particular self-other-bodies and spaces. The venues are all separate from the actual local site of work: some may be in a training room at the workplace and others are totally off site. For example, I regularly conduct training in the Board room of a certain ex-services club. I choose this venue over other possible ones for specific reasons. Firstly,

the participants feel valued because they are sitting in a nice room, in high back leather arm chairs designed for distinguished and powerful people who make decisions. They do not have to walk through the poker machine area to get to our private room and we have access to a lovely verandah. As part of the course I supply unlimited tea and coffee and great food for morning and afternoon tea and lunch. They feel respected, appreciated and important, and by association, I hope they appreciate OHS as valuable and important. I pay particular attention to the construction of these spaces and I pay much attention to these symbols and the meanings they offer.

Not all venues offer all these benefits. A company I work for supplies its own purpose designed training room at its premises, although separate from the work areas. This is good in that the participants feel at home there, but I am the outsider and need to work hard to be taken into their confidence. It can take the course participants longer to open up because they are very close to the normalising gaze, yet the close proximity to their actual workplace means we can easily leave the room and they can show me exactly what they mean when they are trying to give an example of a point they are making.

It is interesting that I have very few senior managers who come to my training courses; the majority of my course participants are line workers and their supervisors, many who come to training with resistance (Wadick, 2009a:1), or they are looking for a break from work, and/or consider safety training as boring and a waste of time and precious resources (Wadick, 2006). Training courses take workers from a place and space of belonging and inclusion, and put them into a training room where they often have not felt a strong sense of belonging and where they previously may have felt excluded by learning technologies such as classrooms, tables, chairs, pens, paper, teacher-as-expert, timetables, laptop, projector, and so on.

I need to overcome many barriers that may already exist to OHS training. I counter these influences with a democratic layout that put us all in a circle, or at least in a u-shape so we can all see each other equally. I then use a learning circle (Macfarlane, Cartmel, & Noble, 2005a) approach to training based on critically reflective discussion that actively engages the hearts and minds of the

workers. The learning circle is an attempt to validate the safety knowledge that these workers possess, by encouraging their critical reflection and reflective practice through talking, listening, sharing stories, and relevant visual material. The courses are conducted as focus groups with the aim of encouraging critically reflective practice. Reflective practice in this context is understood as 'the ability to evaluate critical incidents within daily work, using this evaluation as a means of improving practice and knowledge about work' (Macfarlane, Cartmel, & Noble, 2005b:49-50).

Reflective practitioners analyse a problem, seek to understand it within their context, think about the results of their actions, and puzzle over why things worked out like they did (White, 2002). The reflective practitioner is one who provides space for 'new possibilities to be explored and realised' (Moss and Petrie, in Macfarlane, et al., 2005b:50). An essential feature is that knowledge is constructed rather than reproduced. When workers are supported in the critical reflection process within their cultural group it has a 'powerful effect on the degree to which they are supported in letting go of older ideas and practices and attempting new ones' (Branford & Schwartz, 1999:81). This process, by imagining otherwise, encourages an agency which may be capable of disrupting OHS discourse enough to create new subject positions of speaking and being heard.

## **Questionnaires**

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to presenting and discussing answers to questionnaires handed out at many OHS courses and one conference presentation.

## **Written data**

I begin this section with an example from one of my courses to demonstrate the partiality of information gathered from the written questionnaires I used for this research and report on in this chapter. There was a participant who was very engaged with trying to work out how to improve the health and safety of workers at his workplace. He vigorously joined in discussion and helped us deconstruct OHS discourse with extremely insightful comments. He was the first person to

describe to me how he could see two competing strands of OHS at his workplace, namely ensuring compliance with paperwork requirements as opposed to making sure you were safe by using common sense. His insightful perception of this opened my eyes to the existence of these co-existent approaches to OHS. My newfound knowledge paved the way for my own almost quantum learning as I began to notice this occurring in almost all workplaces that introduced OHS management systems. It was obliquely described by Egan (1994) with his discussion of the distinction between the official and the shadow sides of organisations, and rendered visible by Borys (2008) who described reliance on common sense by workers as opposed to reliance on paperwork by managers to keep workers safe.

This person who was reluctant to write, helped me to find words to describe what I was seeing and hearing, he helped me convert amorphous ideas and data into an argument, a proposition for which I keep finding evidence. However, when I gave out the written questionnaire to fill in for my research, he declined, saying: 'Oh, I'm not very good at putting my thoughts into writing'. This is consistent with Derrida's account of the logic of writing to be fundamental to the division of labour (Cooper, 1989:493). The person in my example who would not write, who could not inscribe his ideas on paper, was not from the hierarchical order of 'a class that writes' (Derrida, 1976, in Cooper, 1989:493). I have often noticed in my courses that the ability and/or willingness to write aligns itself fairly closely along the same demarcation zones as the division of labour – management writes, laborers and line workers do not. Hence, written data, although useful, is partial, has limitations and cannot, does not, fully represent everyone's' truth, and it must be analysed in this light.

So, it is within this context that I distributed questionnaires to my students and asked them to respond as part of my research. The questionnaires gave people the chance to give their written opinion on various OHS topics in their own words. These words were coded by the researcher into themes and are presented in this chapter in tabular format, giving them the appearance of scientific veracity. However, these tables are qualitative data reinvented in a quantitative form and this type of data has its own limitations. For example,



people rarely write more than a few words as a response to each question; it is not possible to ask them to elaborate or to check for or develop meaning. They may interpret the questions differently to what I intended and I may interpret their answers differently to what they intended. Also, many seemed to have difficulty with literacy because spelling and grammar was very often a challenge for them. Despite these caveats, I have identified themes that I think are worth pursuing because they reveal types of categories that are perceived as important to the participants themselves. When analysing these categories I will attempt to deconstruct them and story them to help understand the forces at play in the world of learning to enact an OHS subjectivity.

## OHS courses

The first questionnaire I review here is one that I have handed out at many different types of OHS training courses, from short 2 hour to 4 day courses. The participants are many and varied, loosely comprised of females and males, aged from between approximately 18 and 65 years, from a broad cross section of industries and job descriptions, and representing most levels within the employment hierarchy. In keeping with Noble et al's (2006:16) model outlining approaches that encourage critically reflective thinking within a learning circle context, early in the class I usually divide the students into small groups and get them to reflect honestly on their practice by discussing and recording answers to the three questions: *What safe things do employees do at your workplace? What unsafe things do employees do at your workplace? Why do employees do unsafe things?* I present the coded and categorised answers to these questions in three tables, one table for each question. I then present some simple and mostly obvious meanings that may be gleaned from the ideas written by the participants as described in the tables.

**Table 1. What safe things do employees do at your workplace?**

Response	No.	%
Wear correct personal protective equipment (PPE)	49	34.2
Follow procedures	23	16
Work safely with machinery	15	10.5
Identify and report hazards	10	7
Correct manual handling techniques	8	5.6

<b>Response</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Attend training	7	4.9
Use the forklift safely	6	4.2
Display safety signs	5	3.5
Conduct risk assessments	3	2
Care for each other	3	2
Don't rush	3	2
Conduct audits	2	1.4
Keep area tidy	2	1.4
Use correct tools	2	1.4
Other	5	3.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>99.6</b>

**Table 2. What unsafe things do employees do at your workplace?**

<b>Response</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Not follow procedures, take shortcuts, cut corners	23	23.4
Not wear PPE	19	19.4
Not use the forklift safely	13	13.3
Unsafe manual handling techniques	9	9.2
Unsafe use of machinery	7	7.1
Not assess risks	6	6.1
Not report hazards or incidents	4	4
Management do not follow safety signs	4	4
Not think of others	2	2
Use the wrong tools	2	2
Overwork	2	2
Not display signs	1	1
Bow to peer pressure	1	1
Not keep the area tidy	1	1
Other	4	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>99.5</b>

**Table 3. Why do employees do unsafe things?**

<b>Response</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Rush and cut corners because of production pressures	48	24.7
Do not understand risks or procedures	33	17
Lack of training	12	6.2
Lazy or because it is easier	12	6.2
Inaction by management	8	4.1
Costs more	8	4.1
Correct tools are not available	7	3.6
Safer alternatives are not provided	7	3.6
Bad habits	7	3.6
Not believe in safety/poor workplace OHS culture	6	3

<b>Response</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Understaffed	6	3
PPE not nearby	5	2.6
Bored	5	2.6
Poor design	4	2
Poor communication	4	2
Male culture	3	1.5
No one is watching	3	1.5
Tired/shiftwork	3	1.5
Less paperwork	2	1
Messy environment	2	1
Juggle responsibilities	2	1
Other	7	3.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>99.4</b>

What, if anything, do these tables show? There are some generalisations that might be made. Firstly, more people say they act safely than unsafely, and the categories named by the people for safe and unsafe behaviours closely align. Wearing of PPE, the most visually obvious symbol of safe behaviours, rates highly both as safe and unsafe acts. There are the same number of people who follow procedures as who do not follow procedures. The more interesting information is in the third table that asks why people do unsafe things at work. Approximately 25% say they rush, cut corners and take health or safety shortcuts because of production pressures. By “production pressures” I am not referring particularly to factory production, rather, production means getting the job done – it could be hours spent on a computer or phone, customer service, manual labour, blue or white collar work, and so on. That is, they know that they are risking their health and safety, but they do it because that is what is expected as part of the job. A further 17% say that people work unsafely because they do not properly understand either the risk of their actions or the procedures necessary for safe working. 10% suggest that either safer alternatives are not provided, correct tools are not available or the required PPE is not nearby. A possible contributor to this may be that 6% believe people do unsafe things because they do not receive adequate training, or that inaction by management (4%) allows safety to be treated as less important than production. However, the 6% who say people act unsafely because they are lazy or it is easier may debate whether extra training or less production pressure would

convince these people not to take risks, especially if there is a negative OHS culture (3%).

From these results it can be seen that people are conscious that they work both safely and unsafely at times. Frequently they work unsafely because the pressure of production is more highly prioritised than the requirement/invitation to work safely. This suggests that working safely is more than knowing what to do; it is a choice one can make if the pressure of production is not acute. As Bernoth (2009) similarly found in her study of manual handling training among aged care workers, working safely is set within tensions of competing discourses, and very often the pressure to produce is more profound, more applied, and more sustained, than the pressure to work safely. It can be seen that the development of OHS subjectivity is constituted within labour relations of power and influence cast by a capitalist system that tends to privilege costs and production over worker safety. This constitution is historically produced and culturally reinforced and places OHS in a subservient position to making profits. Despite OHS rhetoric and recent improvements, workers are still not free to make unfettered or unilateral decisions to work safely because their OHS subjectivity is positioned within these webs of contradictions created by the power dynamics at the workplace.

The responses to the questionnaires indicate that the workers are acting subjects, performing within the parameters offered by the dominant discourses at their workplaces, yet they are less often speaking subjects verbally challenging hazards, risks and risky requirements and behaviours. Many admit to working unsafely, notwithstanding OHS legislation and management systems that espouse the mantra of empowering employees by encouraging them to report hazards, assess risks, and refuse to perform dangerous work. Why, therefore, do so many do unsafe things? Is it because they do not know their rights or know the dangers they face? 23% say they do not understand risks or procedures or they lack training. Perhaps some leverage for increased agency could be extracted from an improved awareness gained through attendance at certain kinds of OHS training that teaches people to recognise hazards and risks at work and to speak up and voice their concerns.

Unfortunately, however, it is not a simple equation for people to speak up. Donaldson (2009:17) suggests that many people who ‘blow the whistle on poor OHS practices’ either lose their jobs, are transferred or are subjected to reprisals and bullying. This demonstrates that developing OHS subjectivity is not just a linear or mathematical model in which worker plus knowledge equals effective OHS subject. No, developing OHS subjectivity is a complex process of navigation, and I am hoping that this research can help provide some markers and buoys as guidance for the seemingly lifelong journey.

The next questionnaire, appearing in appendix A, asks course participants 5 questions. This exercise is structured differently to the previous one: firstly, it is answered at the end of a 4 day course for members of OHS committees and OHS representatives, while the first questionnaire is always at the beginning of many types of courses. Secondly, these questions are answered by the individuals themselves rather than in small groups, although they are permitted, even encouraged, to talk to others in the room. Thirdly, and unlike the first questionnaire, they do not usually report these findings back to the main group but hand them back to the researcher; they know before they complete this exercise that the information they offer will be used for my PhD research.

100% of the responses (53/53) answered the first question *Will you be able to use the information from this course at work?* with a ‘Yes’ (47), ‘definitely’ (5) or ‘I think so’ (1). There was not one response that indicated they could not use the information, suggesting that training can be perceived as useful in learning how to enact an OHS subjectivity. Question 2 asked them to describe *how the information from the course will make their workplace safer*. Table 4 summarises their answers.

**Table 4. How will the information from this course help to make your workplace safer?**

Response	No.	%
It has given me a better understanding of my role	26	27.3
I am now able to follow OHS processes such as hazard reporting, participation in risk assessments and putting items on the agenda	18	19
I now have a better knowledge of OHS and legal requirements	12	12.6

Response	No.	%
I now have a better understanding of safe work procedures	11	11.5
I now have more knowledge and more awareness of OHS	11	11.5
I am now more confident to fulfill my role as an OHS committee member	8	8.4
I have learned practical skills	4	4.2
I now know how to ensure OHS consultation	2	2.1
I will help enforce OHS	2	2.1
I can now analyse problems better	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>99.7</b>

Many people felt as though, with a better understanding of their role, OHS requirements and safe work procedures, combined with a greater confidence and more practical skills, they will be more proactive in following and implementing OHS processes that will result in a safer workplace. The focus of the answers in table 4 suggests a greater emphasis on an agentic speaking subject rather than the responses from the previous questions that highlighted more actively animated embodied actions. Of course, the wording of the questions could have weighted it in this fashion, as the first questionnaire specifically asked for comments on safe or unsafe *acts* while the question for table 4 invited comments on agency. An alternative explanation may be that attendance at a 4-day course in which participants were encouraged to identify barriers to safe working and collaboratively and verbally try to solve them encouraged them to imagine a more agentic future. Further research may help uncover such a link. Whatever the reason, participants strongly identified that being able to speak as an agentic subject was very important to them in making the workplace safer.

The next question (question 3) asked them to name any challenges they could foresee in carrying out their new proactivity, their new proactive subjectivity. Table 5 summarises these responses.

**Table 5. What are the challenges you see in implementing this information at work?**

Challenges	No.	%
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Negative attitudes and a poor safety culture	18	22.2
Getting enough time because of work overload	12	14.8
Convincing management of the need for better OHS	11	13.6
Not many challenges because the workplace is already supportive of OHS	11	13.6
The costs of implementation	6	7.4
Correctly putting my case forward	5	6.1
Planning a schedule of OHS activities	4	4.9
Getting staff to report or speak up	3	3.7
Keeping proactive	2	2.4
Starting from scratch	2	2.4
Having meaningful OHS committee meetings	2	2.4
The complexity of OHS	1	1.2
Other	4	4.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>99.6</b>

By far the biggest challenge presented is the perceived negative attitudes to OHS from other workers. Here again we come across this conundrum of why workers have negative attitudes to OHS when the goal is to improve their own health and safety? This goes against a common sense idea that one of our prime instincts is self preservation! OHS official discourse is ostensibly to ensure worker health and safety. As I often ask my students *Who wants to die young so their boss can live in a waterfront mansion?* They all agree this is unacceptable. However workers still knowingly take risks, they knowingly allow their bodies to suffer and degrade even though they have the statutory right not to do so. An important question to answer is “What creates these negative attitudes?” I explore this further in the next 3 chapters.

The next challenge by ranking is that the new OHS committee members and representatives are concerned that they will not get enough time for their new role because of the pressures of their demanding workload. This is despite the fact that the OHS Regulation 2001 mandates the employer to provide adequate time and resources for OHS committee members and OHS representatives to carry out their role (New South Wales Government, 2001: clause 27). While 13.6% of responses claim that a major hurdle will be convincing management of the importance of OHS, the same number of people predict few challenges because their workplace is already quite supportive of it. Unfortunately, the scope of this questionnaire has not allowed to separate out supportive from non-

supportive workplaces and trace how this factor influences their OHS agency. The interview results presented in chapter 6 provide more insight into this fundamental topic because in depth questions allowed for themes to be thoroughly explored and followed up.

If we combine the challenge of the cost of implementation with convincing management, it approximates the challenge of overcoming negative attitudes. Hence, even though much of the language of OHS situates it as a tension within the binary of costs/production versus safety, there actually exists a complex web of pressures and influences. It is not simply us and them. We are all subject to and subjects of OHS discourse. Us is them, and them is us. Rather than belonging on opposite sides, we are all on a continuum or in a circle and are all subject to the same or similar pressures, responsibilities and expectations.

Two people captured some of these tensions; the first writes: *Being more aware I may be more outspoken on OHS matters. This may result in some people not bringing issues to my attention...but...may stop them taking short cuts!* This new OHS committee member is treading a fine balance between enacting a proactive subjectivity and putting people offside by his enthusiasm. He is learning to enact an agentic subject position of speaking up. He recognises that new subject positions are being made available by the OHS discourse, his right to speaking has been redefined and he now can imagine a new self. However, he is fully aware that his new found agency may turn him from an 'us' to a 'them', but he is willing to negotiate this hurdle to help improve safety. Controversially, in speaking up and becoming a 'them' he may silence some of the voices of his previous 'us'. Oh what a web of complexity. At least he is willing to try some fledgling steps. Another notes: *would like to help make work a safer place with my input without being overzealous about safety.* This is another person trying to come to terms with similar political implications of speaking up, of disrupting hegemony. They know full well that there are political ramifications of taking up the invitation to participate. They are both struggling with the fact that enacting a proactive subjectivity inserts them more directly into the microphysics of power (Foucault, 1986c:183) at their workplaces; they are



wondering how to navigate these new relations of power without causing people to resist.

Question 4 of the same questionnaire asks people to outline any things that they imagined would make it easier to implement the new competencies gained from attending the course, and table 6 is a summary of these responses.

**Table 6. What would make it easier to implement at work?**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Management support, especially senior management	15	22.4
More resources	9	13.4
More time	9	13.4
More relevant information and research	8	11.9
A good committee and a good chairperson	5	7.5
Employee support	5	7.5
Better communication	3	4.5
Give committee authority to allocate a budget	2	2.9
Older workforce set in their ways	2	2.9
Quoting legislation	2	2.9
More/better training for workers	2	2.9
Understanding the workplace OHS systems	1	1.5
Templates, checklists, schedules	1	1.5
Reward reporting	1	1.5
Examine near misses	1	1.5
An OHS officer	1	1.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>99.7</b>

Management support is highest on the list, with 22.4% of people suggesting that if senior management took a more visible and active role in initiating OHS events by making time for them and prioritising them, OHS improvements would be easier to implement. They also believe that if they had more time (9%) and more resources (9%) for their role they would be more effective. These top three responses closely align with the previous table in which convincing management and getting enough time were two of the greatest challenges for implementing OHS at work. Responses consistently reveal that OHS subjectivity is constituted within tensions set in a framework of workplace pressures. It appears that the development of OHS subjectivity is neither normative nor easy and requires support and encouragement. It can easily be cauterized through apathy, inattention, or myriad ways of negative reinforcement. OHS subjectivities are more readily developed in a supportive environment in which OHS hazards and

risks are recognised, named and dealt with. It struggles to grow when not nurtured. As with the results from table 5, this idea that agency is nurtured by a supportive environment is discussed in more detail in the next 2 chapters, and is especially teased out in a section of Chapter 6 called *A Politics of Hope*.

Now that their minds and hearts have been opened more to OHS thinking through the course, almost 12% of people believe that access to more information and research will help them to bring about a healthier and safer workplace. Not surprisingly, having an effective committee with a good chairperson is also seen as important (7.5%). Support of employees for OHS (7.5%) appears once more, and again begs the question of why they would not support it. This may be related to how OHS has been introduced into workplaces and how it is often perceived by workers as restrictions imposed on them rather than the freedom to act in one's best interests of body maintenance and health and well being. This is supported by a recent comment from a person who attended a 1-day OHS awareness course. He said to me *'The course really turned me around; I always thought OHS was about restricting what you could do, but now...well, it really changed my mind, it's about keeping you safe'*. This is almost a defining moment and represents to me as a trainer the outcome that I strive for – inspiring people to forge their own OHS agency.

Question 5 of the questionnaire asked people simply for any other comments about making the workplace safer. This question received significantly less responses than the previous four questions. Table 7 summarises the results.

**Table 7. Any other comments about making the workplace safer?**

Comments	No.	%
Eternal vigilance and the need to remain positive	16	28.2
More OHS training for all workers	9	23
Everyone needs to take personal responsibility for OHS	5	12.8
I want to make the workplace safer	3	7.7
Do not want to be over zealous	2	5.1
Need to keep OHS management simple	2	5.1
A safe workplace is a productive workplace	1	2.5
Need to get buy in from all staff	1	2.5
Communicate more with all staff	1	2.5
Legislation is unrealistic	1	2.5
Lack of funding for OHS	1	2.5

<b>Comments</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Safety is common sense	1	2.5
Need regular external audits	1	2.5
<b>Total</b>	39	99.4

The need for eternal vigilance and remaining proactive was named by 28.2% of people as a critical element for the successful performance of their new role. The language used here could suggest there is a perceived struggle between OHS and not-OHS, and if one lets down one's guard, 'not-OHS' will increase its hold. This reinforces the proposition that the discourse of OHS is contested and fraught with tensions between competing pressures, that it is not fixed, but fluid and in process, and therefore open to change where/when enough force, energy or effort is applied. (Here again I resort to the language of struggle and conflict implying winners and losers, reinforcing the historical development of this discourse, founded and born out of struggle).

'More training' received the second highest priority, with 23% of respondents suggesting that all workers from all levels should have the opportunity to participate in OHS training; several recommended that they participate in the 4-day OHS consultation course that they have just finished as it teaches many skills to help workers navigate OHS discourse back at the workplace. Almost 13% suggest everyone at work needs to take some personal responsibility for their own safety, perhaps the inference is that we cannot rely purely on systems to protect us, but need to bring an 'intelligent awareness' (Abrahamsson & Somerville, 2007:62) or mindful risk awareness (Hopkins, 2005) to our workplace situation.

### **Sydney Safety Conference**

The next questionnaire I discuss is one I asked participants to fill in, in small groups, at my presentation at the Sydney Safety Conference 2008 (see Appendix B). The title of this presentation was 'How to Ensure Effective OHS Training'. I was given a 90 minute time slot that brought two streams of conference presentations together. I was appealing to OHS trainers, professionals and other interested stakeholders. Approximately 120 people

attended this presentation, most of whom engaged by participating in small group discussions and filling in the questionnaires. These questions more directly addressed my research question of how workers learn to enact an OHS subjectivity. Many of these people were OHS professionals and/or people who were highly motivated to improve health and safety at work. The first question asked: 'What is an effective OHS worker?' Table 8 summarises their answers.

**Table 8. What is an effective OHS worker?**

<b>An effective OHS worker is one who ...</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Is not complacent and continuously assesses OHS risks	27	22.5
Has good communication skills and is not afraid to speak up or ask questions	25	20.8
Is proactive in initiating improvements in health and safety	11	9.2
Will cooperate with the employer/legislation and follows procedures	9	7.5
Is solutions focused in dealing with risks	8	6.7
Is knowledgeable and competent	6	5
Cares for their fellow workers	5	4.2
Takes responsibility for health and safety of self	5	4.2
Is a good listener	4	3.4
Willing to teach others and lead by example	4	3.4
Recognises and reports hazards and near misses	3	2.5
Is passionate about OHS	3	2.5
Is supported by management	2	1.7
Is good at team work	2	1.7
Is trained and supervised	2	1.7
Puts safety before profits	1	.8
Has good judgement	1	.8
Has common sense	1	.8
<b>Totals</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>100</b>

According to 22.5% of this group an effective OHS worker is one who is not complacent and continuously assesses risks, similar to the 'eternal vigilance' that ranked first in the previous table. Effective OHS workers are required to be confident and assertive with good communication skills and not afraid to speak up (20.8%), proactive in initiating OHS improvements (9.2%) and solutions focused (6.7%). At the same time they need to be willing to cooperate with OHS legislation and employer-led procedures (7.5%), while being knowledgeable and competent (5%) will assist them enacting their OHS subjectivity. Taking responsibility for one's own safety was seen as important as caring for the safety of fellow workers, each scoring 4.2% of responses.

According to these OHS professionals, a competent, effective OHS subject is not necessarily one who has a high level of technical OHS skills but is a person who has competencies such as situation awareness, self-confidence, communication and negotiation. This same issue keeps coming up – developing an OHS subjectivity is much more than following rules and procedures, it encompasses embracing one's right to speak up, to challenge the status quo, to refuse to do dangerous work, and to negotiate safer ways of doing things. This is perhaps one of the critical points that, if managed well, will help take OHS improvements to the next level. It rang true for a senior OHS scientist from the United States who commented to me after a recent international safety conference in Melbourne:

*In my experience, based on US conditions, construction training for workers and competent persons tends to focus almost exclusively on technical skills such as how to perform a particular task or how to correctly use PPE, or what the legal OHS standards are for a particular topic. Competencies and skills for communicating and coping with employers and co-workers to correct unsafe conditions and to promote good OHS practices are critical but rarely appear to be provided as part of formal training programs. These competencies and skills need to be recognized as such and addressed with the most relevant type of training (Matt Gillen, personal email communication, 29/10/2009).*

An effective OHS worker is one who takes an active role in negotiating a safe workplace and it assumes, perhaps unknowingly, that this person has an equal share in the power to make decisions and allocate resources. Yet herein lies the difficulty because most workers rarely have access to this kind of power. Even senior management have limited power in some sense. Let me demonstrate this point with an example from a recent consulting assignment.

Recently I went to a factory to discuss some particular OHS needs and the site manager informed me that we need to put safety glasses on before entering the factory proper. He explained that a 'directive' had come from head office after a recent near-miss to an office worker walking through another factory, and from now on it is compulsory to follow this procedure. So, we put our glasses on, even though it was afternoon shift and no manufacturing machines were in operation for the whole shift. Most employees, including the site manager, thought it a ridiculous imposition, but he enforced it because he had no choice. In fact, he actively discouraged discontent and viewed it as an activity that

required disciplinary action. This new rule was generally perceived by the employees as protecting the company, at a corporate level, from litigation rather than protecting the safety of the workers.

Different groups, with differing needs, propose different solutions to the same problems. In this thesis I endeavour to deconstruct and understand 'how these different solutions result from a specific form of problematization' (Foucault, 2003c:24), aptly summarised by one course participant and reiterated throughout this thesis as 'two strands of OHS'. Both shop floor workers and senior management are involved in asymmetrical relations of power that 'allow an extremely limited margin of freedom' (Foucault, 2003a:35) across all levels in an organisation or at a workplace, resulting in many from all occupational groups feeling powerless to be heard.

Workers were disempowered from making their own assessment of the risk in their particular site, and by implication, they were not trusted. When they are forced to acquiesce to procedures they oppose they can lose faith in their power to influence decision making. They often perceive the invitation to speak up, to have an opinion, as hollow rhetoric because time and time again their suggestions go unanswered. They know where the real power is. Both management and workers allow this seemingly arbitrary arrangement to control them by not challenging head office. Consequently, their voice becomes partial and preferential. They actively subordinate their agentic selves in return for job security, money, meaning, or identity (Deetz, 1998:159). Hence, their OHS subjectivity is being formed within a matrix of subordination and therefore hampers the accomplishment of successful OHS consultation. The more they position themselves as subordinated, the less they will use their voice to open discussions that challenge, that is, to act *on*, rather than simply act *in* present institutional arrangements (Deetz, 1998:159).

Next, the participants at the Safety Conference presentation were asked 'What contributes to making people effective OHS workers?' Table 9 presents the results.

**Table 9. What contributes to making people effective OHS workers?**

<b>Contributors</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Support from all levels of management with workers trusted and respected by being involved in decision making	38	31.9
More OHS training, knowledge and information	28	23.5
Open communication and consultation across the organisation with effective and transparent reporting and feedback systems	22	18.4
Promotion, recognition and reward for OHS	8	6.7
Well constructed and articulated OHS management system that integrates OHS into all work processes	7	5.9
Support of peers	4	3.3
Assertiveness/self confidence	4	3.3
Supervision	3	2.5
Experience/competence	3	2.5
Adequate resources	2	1.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>99.7</b>

A consistent theme has emerged that highlights the importance of demonstrated management commitment that respects and trusts workers and involves workers in decision making (32.9%). They will feel trusted and respected if they have some real power to make decisions affecting their health and safety. Senior management demonstrate this commitment by ensuring workers have adequate training and information so they can become more involved (23.5%). Importantly, this will only work if there is open communication and consultation across the organisation where reporting and feedback are intrinsic to conducting the business (18.4%). This speaks of a similar finding highly regarded in table 8, that an effective OHS worker is one who is an effective communicator.

Some actions of management undermine workers and send out messages that their opinions are not really valued, despite the rhetoric of their consultation policy and procedures. I regularly hear stories from workers that they consider their opinions not valued because very often their concerns are not listened to, or their reports fall on deaf ears as they disappear into a “black hole”. One new employee at a large construction site told me that even though he was told at the induction that he should report all hazards and near misses/hits (incidents that could have resulted in an injury but did not, often through good luck or personal skill), when he regularly and enthusiastically reported them he was

warned by his foreman that *'these'll go on your record'*, indicating that when the next job starts he may be overlooked if he kept this up.

Very quickly workers learn what is safe to say and what is unsafe because they have no authority to re-locate control over the processes of production, which is at the heart of the matter (Creighton & Gunningham, 1985:4), and management always has the final say (Gunningham, 1985:43). Hence, the version of worker participation, with no effective decision making power beyond the right to be consulted, is unlikely to bring about the degree of safety that workers require because of the inherent conflict between health and safety and production pressures (Gunningham, 1985:47).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented and discussed responses to different questionnaires distributed at OHS courses and one presentation at a safety conference. The key points to arise from this discussion are as follows: People recognise that workers behave both safely and unsafely at work for a number of reasons. They may work unsafely because the pressure for production overrides the appeal to work safely. People often know that they are taking shortcuts or not following procedures, but do not speak up and voice their concerns because this challenges the power arrangements at work. This is despite the fact that many participants strongly identified being able to speak up as an agentic subject was critical in making the workplace safe. It is also very important for organisations generally that workers do speak up to further organisational learning and illuminate blind spots that are unseen organisational risks. However, many people who attended my training courses considered that people would be more willing to speak up and report hazards/risks if they attended more and appropriate OHS training that reinforced the health and safety message and helped them develop the skills to use the tools available at their workplace for voicing concerns and suggestions.

The pressure not to speak up comes from many sources, not the least of which is peer pressure from fellow workers – it is not simply power exerted by management over workers, but power relations within groups of workers, within



workplaces. However, it is perceived by many that people would place more emphasis on health and safety if the more senior management took a more visible and active role in initiating OHS arrangements. This chapter has clearly identified the acute and crucial significance from the workers point of view, of active and visible support for OHS from senior management. A related and important issue that has emerged is the real risk of being marginalised and/or bullied for speaking out, which tends to silence workers and result in them keeping their knowledge, thoughts, perceptions and experiences hidden from view.

It has been shown in this chapter that OHS subjectivity is constructed within a context of competing pressures, and those pressures that receive attention from senior management are the ones that become prioritised. It is difficult for workers to adopt or take up a proactive agentic OHS subject position if they are not motivated to do so because, with such a lack of support, they risk censure and marginalization. The following data chapters explore this theme in more depth and Chapter 6 explicitly tackles solutions to this dilemma.

# Chapter 5. People's Stories

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## Introduction

In this chapter I discuss data produced from different modes of inquiry. Firstly I present and analyse information that was gained from a series of safety observations training courses I taught at a particular workplace. Safety observations consist of a systematic program in which a worker observes another worker performing her/his job, discusses the safety aspects of the job with the worker, fills out a report that judges the performance of the worker observed doing the task, and submits this to management for review. Following this I move into terrain opened up through two stories told to me by workers who struggle with what OHS subjectivity means to them. These stories were not part of the formal interviewing process of data collection but occurred naturalistically as part of conversations. Peter, a former construction industry workplace colleague of mine, told me his story when he heard that I was conducting research into OHS. His was an impromptu telling, from the heart. I was in his workplace and he invited me to listen to his story to help me with the research. I did not tape record his story but wrote it down from memory when I got home later that day. When I use his words in retelling his story they are not necessarily verbatim, but constructed from my recollection of our conversation.

The second story was told to me at a course I was conducting by a group of about four workers during a discussion we were having about managing health and safety in their workplace. As with Peter's story, this was not tape recorded, but written down later as field notes. I include both of these stories in this thesis as data because I believe they help us capture many of the complex and competing tensions within which OHS subjectivity is constructed. Peter's story in particular is very personal and shows just how individual and intimate each person's OHS journey is. Both stories demonstrate the difficulties of enacting a proactive and agentic OHS subject position. OHS is really, merely, only one factor to be considered when strategizing one's participation in work.

## **Safety observations training**

In this section of the thesis I describe a small case study for which data was collected from several sessions of a course I conducted to teach and/or refresh workers in the skills required to conduct behaviour based safety observations of fellow workers at their workplace. These trainees each filled out a questionnaire that I designed, consisting of 7 questions (see Appendix D), as well as their own in-house safety observations report card of a simulated, imagined, or previously conducted safety observation. I do not present these results in tabular form as the nature of the written responses and the filled in cards do not easily lend themselves to quantitative coding. I use this data to describe what the workers say are the main issues for them. When I use the term “workers”, I include employees from all layers of the organisation at this site, as they are all driven by the corporate requirement to conduct a certain number of observations.

They work at a large manufacturing workplace that has many obvious and visible signs of proactive OHS management. The stories the workers tell confirm that their health and safety has improved markedly over, say, the last 10 years, and new workers to this establishment contrast the good management of OHS there with relatively poor management in other workplaces that they have come from. Therefore, I am talking about a company that prides itself in striving for excellence and the continual improvement of OHS management, and these safety observations are to be seen within this context.

Safety observations are directly related to Foucault’s analysis of power and its relationship to the gaze of surveillance epitomised by Bentham’s panopticon as a disciplinary technology. They are an example of Foucault’s description of ‘normalizing judgements’ (Fillingham, 1993:125) or normalisation, which is a system that organises normal behaviour and is a result of this organising (Rabinow, 1986:20). It is a type of discipline which assesses individuals against a so-called objective description of what is normal. “Normal” itself is really just a product of a truth game: what is normal is defined by those who have the power to define it and whose interests lie in how that truth is defined. In this case study the desired normal behaviours are those behaviours that are written in the safe operating procedures produced for the workers; or, if they are not written they

can at least be described as either safe or unsafe behaviours. These procedures give very little room for individuals to use their reason to make judgements, they are expected to comply almost without reason, automatons of production. These 'procedures of normalisation' (Foucault, 1986g:48) are here exercised in the name of the health and safety of the workers' bodies, yet the workers have not defined these truths, they have been defined for them. Safety observers observe workers' bodies and these workers' bodies must docilely replicate the truth that is defined for them so a report card can be documented, categorised, submitted and counted. OHS behaviours must be described, defined and measured in order for them to be governed.

This company is an international company and people from a head office not in Australia have decided that workers in Australia will conduct these safety observations. The corporate team has defined how many they will conduct and how they will conduct, record and report them. The workers conduct these observations on each other; they only do them because they have to as part of their key performance indicators, they do not do them because they believe in them. In fact, out of the 50 workers who attended my course, not one extolled the virtues of the current system of observations, and almost all had something negative to say. They perceive this system similarly to the discussion in Chapter 2 in which I described the existence of two strands in OHS management – one is paperwork designed to protect management from liability and the other is workers being careful in order to protect their own health and safety, demonstrated by one comment on the questionnaire: *accidents versus paperwork*. Borys (2008) notes that the paperwork creates the illusion of safety for management, and the workers' belief in their ability to avoid injury by being careful is likewise an illusion.

All workers at this factory are agents of 'relations of power' (Foucault, 2003a:34) in its capillary exercise. Corporate level pressures site management, site management pressures supervisors, supervisors pressure line workers and line workers pressure each other, all to ensure they fulfill this externally imposed obligation to conduct, record and submit the correct numbers of observations according to their kpi's. However the line workers who conduct the observations

are not simply helpless, powerless pawns in the process who must do what they are told under threat of discipline, although this absolute, monarchic, brutal and 'penal' (Foucault, 1986d:193) form of disciplinary power may be the unsaid, underlying fundamental, driving the actions of all the stakeholders. No, as Foucault suggests, inherent to power is resistance, and to study power relations we need to study the forms of resistance, to analyse power relations through the 'antagonism of strategies' (Foucault, 2003e:128). Whilst the corporate level managers may be optimistic about the success of their system, the actual governing of these workers is a congenitally failing operation (Miller & Rose, 2008:35) because the governed are heterogeneous and there are unplanned outcomes. The line workers play games with power as they exercise their resistance. They do not, cannot, resist overtly and openly because the corporate monarch has the absolute power to hire and fire if they do not 'co-operate with his or her employer...in the interests of health safety and welfare' (NSW Government, 2000:section 20(2)), OHS legislation authorises the employer to insist.

How then do they resist? Their resistance is subtle, gentle, refined, polished, practiced, oiled and smooth. It leaves no sharp edges or reflective surfaces that give away their game; compliance and resistance are defined and contained within the same space as inherent to one another. Foucault suggests that power does not only repress, it also produces; power needs to be considered as a 'productive network' (Foucault, 1986f:61) more than just a negative force whose function is repression. In the example of these safety observations, power produces resistance.

Yet, management knows what the workers are doing, and they say nothing, they participate in the same game – the game of numbers, of submitting the correct number of observations. It is like, 'If you give us the numbers, we'll leave you alone', so they perform the correct number of observations to satisfy the rule, because gaining the correct numbers is vitally important for the managers' kpi's. This coercion in the name of OHS privileges and supervises the processes of the activity (getting the required numbers), rather than its results (identifying possible ways to improve OHS) (Foucault, 1986c:181). The rules of the game

are clear, although the rules the workers actually play by dwell in the shadow side, in the unspoken, the unmentionable. They fill out the cards, they achieve the correct numbers of filled in cards, but they do not put their heart in it, they do not try, they do not embrace the idealized spirit of the system – they use a semi-covert form of passive resistance. I now present some words of the participants as they wrote them in the questionnaires to demonstrate some of the modes of their resistance. In response to question 6 that asked them to outline the disadvantages of the safety observations system, the following comments were written:

*Sometimes people just go through the motions*

*May be done just to hit a number*

*Too much paperwork*

*Observations become repetitively meaningless*

*It's just a tick box activity*

Hence the workers resist by filling in and submitting the cards. They rarely actually perform the observation on their repetitive work, they just fill in the cards repetitively. They often fill them in exactly the same, time after time, with no thought, no engagement, knowing that this system is not about their health and safety, but about numbers. They always achieve their numbers; the graphs that publicly display their efforts always display perfect numbers, perfect process. They never display content or results, purely numbers.

Despite these negative perceptions and the fact that the workers do not really like their role as the monitor *possibly upsetting the person* whom they are observing, they do see that there could be a place for safety observations in the efforts to continually improve safety. For example, in response to question 5 in the questionnaire that asked them to list the advantages of the safety observations program, some people wrote the following typical answers:

*a second set of eyes will see things differently*

*raise awareness of safety*

*recognise unconscious movement/actions*

*prevent injuries and raise safety concerns*

*task may be made safer and easier*

It seems that these workers can see a possible role for the surveillance embodied in safety observations. Like Foucault, I wish to understand what is going on in terms of OHS practice in workplaces. He says 'I have no solution to propose. But I believe that it is futile to cover our eyes – we must try to get to the bottom of things and to face up to them' (Foucault, 2003d:75). However, and unlike Foucault, I want to search for solutions, to discover leverage points that can make the difference, to learn and describe where the potential is for safety observations to improve worker health and safety. For this I now go back to the words of the workers, to try and isolate the crux of their disenchantment. The nub of the matter seems to be that the recorded cards are not actually used by management to improve safety for workers, but the number of the cards is merely counted! After all, they are not for their safety, they are for kpi's. An imaginary thinking process goes on in their heads, something like:

*Oh, so why bother doing them?*

*Well, we have to.*

*Well then, let's do them as quick and easy as we can to keep them off our backs.*

*We'll write the same ones over and over because we never hear anything back.*

The decisive point is that they never (or extremely rarely) receive any feedback on the cards they produce. They were very united on this point, as some answers to question 7 that asked them to make suggestions for improving the program demonstrate:

*The advice is not taken or ignored,*

*No feedback,*

*Need feedback from person(s) who collate these cards,*

*No changes made if safety risk found.*

If the workers were trusted and respected enough that they were given the authority to redesign this system, they may not get rid of it altogether because they can see its potential. However they would not prioritise the requirement for certain numbers to be submitted, they would give precedence to having the requirement that safety risks identified in the cards are addressed. Again, the two strands of safety management – the numbers game insisted upon by corporate senior management to protect them from liability through measurable OHS pro-activity, and the concerns of workers for real changes that will improve their health and safety. However, if workers were actually allowed to design and implement a system that made management accountable to workers for fixing worker concerns, it would assume more equal power relationships which would threaten management prerogative, the basis of our economic system (Rabinow, 1986:17-18).

The above points are well illustrated by the cards that were filled out in the training room in a simulated exercise introduced in the following way: 'Please fill them out as if these observations and cards were not a numbers game, but were acted upon'. That is, workers were asked to imagine otherwise, to imagine they did have some agency, visualize an agentic subject position in which they could disrupt and challenge by having a real voice. The contrast is startling: they did not focus on unsafe acts/positions of workers (often the focus of safety observations), but 47% made suggestions to eliminate the hazard by redesign and/or engineering controls. That is, make the job safer for workers. However, when conducting their safety observations and filling out the cards for their kpi's they rarely proffer such suggestions because they feel they are never acted upon, merely counted.

They know that their knowledge is neither sought nor valued. However, in this example we find a possible lever for developing OHS agency and it is based on the concept that workers are trusted and respected enough to become equal partners in developing methods for managing health and safety. It seems that these games of truth and contests for power could offer opportunities to produce a safer workplace, but at the moment that opportunity is being squandered. If the workers' opinions really were listened to, if they really were trusted and



respected, if they really felt engagement offered results, they would speak up. This will not happen easily. I have personally written a report to management outlining a plan of action that will result in a more meaningful exchange by regularly giving feedback on the results, to no avail. OHS discourse does open up opportunities for change, but it does not ensure them and does not show how to achieve them.

## **Listening to stories**

I have become interested in the improvement of health and safety for workers for several reasons. Foremost among these are the people I meet in my daily life and work and the stories they tell me. Peoples' stories are the openings into their worlds (Post, 2004:25) and they offer a window into how subject positions are constituted. Narrative processes organise experience and knowledge of the world and help self-understanding (Dhunpath, 2000, in de Carteret, 2008:236). The stories are saturated with cultural meaning and therefore offer potential interpretations linked to how and why people develop their practices (Sondergaard, 2002:191).

Many working people have strong opinions about OHS and the dilemmas it poses for them; they often open up to me by telling me their heartfelt stories because I am interested in what they have to say. They know and feel that I am interested because I use 'techniques of validation' (Feil, 1992, in Bernoth, 2009: 52) in my active listening approach to hearing them, as I try to appreciate the reality of their perspective.

In the following section I describe and discuss a story told to me by Peter in which he reflects on his body that has been wounded by years of hard work. I had known Peter when I was a tradesperson in the construction industry, but I had not seen him for several years. I went to his workplace to purchase some materials for my home renovations and we began talking, renewing our acquaintance. He asked me what I was doing now, and I told him that I was currently doing a research project in OHS, talking to workers about what it means for them. He seemed to take this as an invitation to tell me an account of his understanding of OHS and how he perceives it in relation to the preservation

of the health and safety of his body. I take his enthusiasm as tacit agreement to allow me to use his story as a part of this research as it was communicated to me in my capacity of researcher.

## **Peter's story**

Peter (all names used in this thesis are pseudonyms) described all the injuries he has to his body and how these make his work extremely painful and challenging. He laments the degradation to his once powerful body, a body he took pride in.

*A young bloke I was working with once said to me: 'I've never met anyone as strong as you'....But that's all gone now.*

However he does not understand these injuries to be connected to OHS discourse; OHS discourse is separate, it is about stopping you doing things that he perceives are a necessary part of the job – if you did not do these things, you wouldn't have a job.

*I'm not allowed to do welding here anymore. Just can't do it. It's stupid, I know, they reckon it's too dangerous...OHS is a load of bullshit.*

He knows his injuries are the cumulative result of hard physical work:

*I suppose we used to overdo it a bit, to try and outdo each other; I would throw a calf onto the back of the ute by myself – that probably didn't help [my back].*

He does not view this sort of practice as connected to OHS, but as normal for that kind of work. It is inherent to the job, and its performance is a source of pride and identity. However, when the injuries are separated like this from the practices that cause them, the person has no access to what OHS discourse says that it offers, such as engineering out the risks, rehabilitation and/or redeployment to more suitable duties. He now has many debilitating injuries:

*My back's gone, my knees, shoulders...Look, I can't even lift my right arm past my shoulder. [He demonstrates this to me]. Ah, that really hurts...terrible.*

Peter knows that if he reports these injuries and the practices that cause them he will eventually lose his job – he will firstly be on light duties (of which there are very few, and when this runs out, they will legally be able to get rid of him). He makes his own judgement, does not report, and attempts to manage his pain

and disability separately. His body has become the point of capture of multiple power relations (Pile & Thrift, 1995b:44) which are simultaneously real (the damage to his body), imagined (he does not associate it with OHS and longs for a different future), and symbolic (OHS has a hidden agenda that is not of benefit to him). His thinking has become naturalized in that he sees his perceptions as logical and immanent, and neutralized in that he believes he has no agency to press for change (Pile & Thrift, 1995b:45). He is convinced that his situation cannot be transcended because he believes that the limits of his situation are natural and therefore insurmountable (Atkins, 2005b:239). His identity has been constituted in the myriad circumstances of the everyday (Rose, 1995:327) and mediated by historical and economic structures (Gilroy, 1996:41).

Peter's daily encounters through involvement with his work as he performs what is routinely expected of him have more influence on the production of subjectivity than any entreaties of OHS rhetoric. His subjectivity is partly constituted in the complex realm where mind and body interact, which enables us to conceive of bodies, his body, always in the process of becoming and always potentially able to be re-imagined and reconstituted (Walsh & Bahnish, 2002:34-35). Yet he carries two strands of potentially closely coupled story-lines but keeps them separate and mutually exclusive, despite the espoused benefits of allowing them to intertwine, despite all the OHS information to which he has been exposed over the last 7 years or so.

OHS subjectivity is represented by the positions people adopt in relation to OHS; Peter has developed a closed position of a fortress-like defence in which OHS is not admitted to his personal realm. His 'corporeal subjectivity' (Walsh & Bahnish, 2002:34) stands in relation to OHS discourse, but would be hard to describe as an OHS subjectivity. His relationship to his body is fundamental to his development of his subjectivity. He is multiply aware of his body, his memory of his once powerful and useful body, and now through pain and the limitations endured from a life of hard physical work, but does not relate this to OHS. This is a fundamental dilemma for an OHS discourse, imposed from outside, from the Other. If it is 'outside', it is not useful and it is something against which he must defend himself. It is perceived as a weapon used by his adversaries to

undermine him and take away his security, his livelihood, his concept of who he is, himself.

OHS discourse has not enabled him to make the new knowledge required to develop a proactive OHS subjectivity. So, as OHS discourse is played out through his body, he clings to his embodied knowledge embedded in his historical concept of himself, a concept he sees no valid reason to question or challenge. The regulations and codes of OHS law do not guide his behaviour as much as the meanings that he ascribes to his situation (Gentleman Byers, 2004:2). Peter is authoring his life within the context of his own self-interpretations (Atkins, 2005c:115). In support of this, social psychologists have shown how people do not easily change their interpersonal theories, assumptions, expectations and impressions, even when evidence contradicts them (Barrett & Cooperrider, 2001:148). When he speaks of OHS he reveals more than he says because the language he uses always harbours within itself what he considers as its 'antithesis' (Cooper, 1989:480), that which is NOT-OHS. His injuries are not OHS related in his mind, an idea that transgresses official OHS discourse.

*Bloody OHS won't help, they only make things worse. If I tell them I can't do my job, well, they'll...there will be no job for me. Where will an old crock like me get a job?*

Despite the seemingly unified stance he presents, cracks are appearing because he can no longer use his body as he once did and the pain is forcing him to rethink his strategies, causing a great unease and tension. His self-assuredness is stumbling as 'fissures' (Fenwick & Somerville, 2006:252) open. His boundaries that define his subjectivity are relaxing, loosening their grip, providing fertile ground for 'emergent knowledges' (Lather, 1991:11), new possibilities and new imaginings for the future. As he wonders about what he is becoming he attempts to generate new knowledges (Somerville, 2007) in his embodied process of 'becoming-other-to-one's-self' (Somerville, 2008:209). However, this remaking of subjectivity is not easy because it requires an overturning of the 'inscriptions' (Davies, 2006:77) already laid down on his body. To turn practice against these inscriptions is to transgress and is complex work

as it requires the turning against the normalising of his current situation (Davies, 2006:77).

Peter is not meekly and powerlessly caught in the web of his past, the fabric of his constructed identity – he is a thinking person who can ‘choose to resist, change and make a difference’ (Jones, 2005:88). So, he laments, he wails and rails, he wonders and he imagines....what new identity positions are on offer, *who can I now become?*

*I’m not sure what’s going to happen to me. I can’t go on like this.....maybe surgery, I don’t know.*

Of course, this becoming new is not unproblematic, it is not simply a technical, rational, or cognitive decision to be made (Venn, 2002:66) and meaning is not a direct result of an empiricist epistemology (Hall, 1996:17). It speaks of emotion, affect, desire, hope, ambition, longing and belonging, and his body is a site of these discursive contestations. As with most adults, Peter is enmeshed in a fabric of interpersonal relationships and an intersubjective web (Venn, 2002:57) that hold him in his present moment and the change required demands a complex renegotiation of these relationships (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999:371). The concept of subjectivity can capture the notion that at one and the same time Peter is an intentional subject, an ‘actor(s) in the world’ (Jones, 2005:88) and subject to forces beyond his conscious control (Jones, 2005:88), at one and the same time a sovereign subject and a subjected subject (Pile & Thrift, 1995b:41). That is, subject to and subject of, both simultaneously, precarious, contradictory (Jones, 2005:89), and in process (Davies, 2005b:100), as he agonises over how to combine the two into an effective strategy. To embrace OHS discourse he will need something at the level of affect (Venn, 2002:66) to become an active subject in becoming subject to the particularly oriented regimes of truth enacted by that discourse (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006:183).

The palimpsest of shifting and movement opens up spaces brimming with different possibilities for developing multiple subjectivities, including an OHS subjectivity. Sadly, for Peter, his perception of the available discourse of OHS does not offer what he needs: security and safety, yet people need safety and security to learn (Caspary, 1996:49); anxiety is generally not conducive to

producing the new self (Caspary, 1996:49). The narrative related by Peter implies 'highly negative conclusions about their chances of changing things' (White, 2004:87) as it sponsors a very 'narrow range of options for action' (White, 2004:90). If people believe they have little power to produce results they will not try, as self-efficacy is a powerful antecedent of agency (Hitlin & Elder, 2007:41).

Herein lies a major dilemma for OHS discourse – it is often not perceived by workers as offering a legitimate choice that fulfills the deep seated and primal needs for physical, emotional and psychological safety and security. It is more often understood, in a Machiavellian sense of subjugation, as a compliance requirement. This has the effect of eliciting basic survival skills designed to protect the psychological self. In this state people exhibit minimum competence on the most routine/mundane level. They will not be creative or excel (Carroll, 2007) because motivation comes from fear rather than personal values (Davies, 2005a:174). Research demonstrates that a person who cannot engage in meaningful learning exchanges at work will withdraw their intentionality, yet when in a safe and supportive environment, she will actively engage her agency in learning (Etelapelto & Saarinen, 2006:170). If they are not supported they are more inclined to self-marginalise in response to what is overtly offered. That is, one's emotional response is a critical predictor of learning. This indicates a major challenge for OHS: how can it offer to workers the opportunity to use their creative talents in partnering with all in the workplace to transform a tendency towards minimum compliance into the co-construction of a discourse that improves OHS outcomes by engaging the hearts and minds of all stakeholders?

Peter has allowed his body to be injured by the wounding practices of his workplace despite an OHS official discourse that requires employers to provide a safe and healthy workplace. He views the onset of his injuries as 'natural, self-evident and indispensable' (Townley, 1998:193). He navigates between competing claims to truth and docilely accepts injury as a part of the job, although 'docile' is possibly not the correct word. He does express a certain amount of rage, but it is powerless to act on its own behalf. His rage is almost emasculating in that it has no action component to alleviate his position. He

consents to his own subjugation and at the same time offers empty complaints and ineffective acts of local resistance (Deetz, 1998:159). This is despite an OHS discourse that says he is allowed/encouraged to take a more empowered and proactive position. Sadly, he does not understand this, he does not understand how to position his subjectivity in relation to OHS in such a way that offers him healing. He would consider me misguided here because he knows, in his embodied knowing, that the only position available to him is the one he has adopted. This deep knowing that he is so sure of is his form of resistance, yet it permits his consent to the continuation of the status quo. In this way he is also an agent, not only a victim, in shaping the nature of his own domination (McKinley & Taylor, 1998:188).

This deep knowing is indicative of Peter's epistemological beliefs – his 'fundamental assumptions about knowledge, its nature, and appropriate ways to create it' (Hofer and Pintrich, 2002 & Schommer, 1994, in Harteis, et al., 2006:123). Peter's beliefs strongly influence his way of dealing with solving the problem of his degenerating body, and he struggles to apply new approaches. As he tries to learn a new way of working and being he is involved in epistemic monitoring and judgement to evaluate his options (Hofer, 2004:43). The results of these assessments have significant consequences for the actions he chooses. His epistemological beliefs substantially influence his work because they constrain how he, as actor, perceives his scope of action (Harteis, et al., 2006:138) and conformist discourses exert more power than transgressive or transformative discourses (Reay, 2006:119). Currently he is hostile to an OHS discourse he perceives as threatening, yet this very hostility may negatively impact on his ability to develop safer alternatives (Rabinowitz, Melamed, Feiner, Weisberg, & Ribak, 1996:376). His hostility blinds him to any appropriate heuristics that OHS discourse may offer to help him find some innovative solutions (Harteis, et al., 2006:126).

I strongly empathise with and understand Peter's dilemma and this is why I include it in my thesis. His story has many similarities to my story. When I was a wall and floor tiler, I raged against the job that was destroying my body, while I found pleasure in my identity as a trusted and respected tradesperson and

business man. I knew if I kept going with it I could possibly end up crippled – I used to quip jokingly: *I'm just saving up for a fancy wheelchair*. I too agonised over how to make a change; I too worried about losing my identity, of losing who I was. Many middle aged construction workers go through this same dilemma. I think I was one of the lucky ones to make a change, and I put it down largely to my tertiary education before I entered the construction industry, as this gave me the confidence to embark on a new learning, a new beginning. One of my co-workers, as I was making the change, said to me:

*Phil, I'm also buggered, but it's too late for me to learn something different, I just don't have the education.*

And even though I have been in this new endeavour now for almost 10 years, I have still not constructed a new identity with which I am familiar and comfortable. I still am unsure of where I belong, who I am and how I can contribute. I still miss the secure identity of my former life. The remaking of identities is perhaps the most difficult part of this transitioning, and something that cannot easily be planned.

## **Truth games**

In this section I present an analysis of a story told to me at one of my courses, relating to 'truth games' (Foucault, 2003a:25) that seek to disempower us through their normalising processes. OHS games of truth can privilege some truths over others by claiming that some truths are more true than others. During one short OHS course of approximately 3 hours duration, I was facilitating a discussion about the hazards and risks encountered by the course participants, and how they managed them. Several of the participants worked in the boiler room at the large manufacturing plant where I was conducting the course. They told me that they used to complain about certain aspects of their safety, but because management was convinced that those workers exaggerate, that there is no substance to their complaints and consequently do not address the complaints, they have stopped complaining. I had this corroborated when I later spoke to management about their health and safety concerns and management replied:

*Oh, they are a bunch of whingers down there.*



In this instance, management has the power to pronounce 'veridictions' (Florence, 2003:2) by declaring that the knowledge articulated by the boiler room workers is false and not worthy of their attention, so their concerns are dismissed. This is despite modern OHS legislation that is designed to re-define whose truth is heard by mandating that an employer must value the suggestions and ideas of employees. This case is an example of management privileging their ideas over the workers' ideas, and then developing rules for the workers based on management's truth. Workers often respond to this type of situation with the retort 'what can you do!', and keep quiet about any real concerns they have.

### **Merging themes**

The three data samples discussed in this chapter all exhibit similar characteristics in terms of answering my research questions. The OHS subjectivities the workers enact are partial and based on a certain type of 'logic of truth' (Jackson & Carter, 1998:50) or discursive formation, understood as a 'complex system for giving meaning to the world' (Deetz, 1998:159). OHS meaning is defined within a capitalist economic system that ascribes power along institutional lines. Within these accepted unequal relations, workers (whether they are managers or line workers), know and consent to their position and obey the rules of that position. OHS legislation has attempted to slightly realign the power structures by requiring employers to not only protect worker health and safety, but to also give them the opportunity to contribute to making decisions about their health and safety. However, the implementation of these requirements is still constituted within asymmetric power relations in which workers perceive OHS as not really offering what it says it does.

For workers to develop an agentic subject position to the extent that they speak up with an active, creative and resistant voice, they require several preconditions. Firstly they need knowledge, knowledge of OHS and knowledge of their rights; secondly they need the opportunity offered by OHS consultative processes such as an OHS committee or representative and transparent reporting arrangements; and thirdly they need the desire to enact their agency, which can be fuelled by the existence of a trusting environment in which they

perceive they have a high degree of self-efficacy, or in which they perceive that their knowledge is appreciated and their truth will be heard. They will not develop such an agentic position if they perceive their revelations and self-exposure will be used against them by people with more power. I am tentatively calling the interaction of these three factors as the “OHS triangle”, inspired by the term “fire triangle” because all of these three preconditions should be met to encourage people to enact agentic OHS subject positions of becoming effective OHS speaking subjects.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter reviewed data obtained from a series of safety observations training courses, presented and discussed Peter’s story told to me by Peter in an impromptu fashion and in the setting of his workplace where a large part of his identity and OHS subjectivity has been constructed, and examined another story co-constructed by several persons who were attending an in-house OHS short course.

Safety observations are a method of managing OHS in which workers observe each other performing a task, discuss the safety aspects of the task with the observed worker, fill in a report card of the encounter, and hand this into management. It was found that workers hand in the required number of completed cards, but are very cynical about this performance improving their health and safety. Management is satisfied because the required numbers of observations are met and these can easily be measured, calculated and displayed as physical evidence of meeting their duty of care obligations.

Despite their criticism of this system, line workers believe that there is a potential role for this type of surveillance if they were empowered to change the focus of the observations from counting how many are done to following up on suggestions made. Their desire for agency is directly related to how efficacious they perceive their efforts to be. Agency does not automatically follow on from increased knowledge or even opportunity, but needs to be fuelled by desire and conversely desire needs to be informed by knowledge to help implement its purposeful intent, and opportunity needs to be present to help focus the

knowledge and desire. Desire may be enhanced and strengthened by knowledge and opportunity, but is not guaranteed by them. The next three chapters delve deeper into these connections and open up to view what the interview participants found to help or hinder the interplay between knowledge, opportunity and desire.

Peter described his injuries and made it clear that OHS does not help make the workplace safe as much as it restricts him from doing things. He has OHS knowledge, he knows OHS offers certain opportunities, but he has no desire to pursue them because he perceives that they do not satisfy his current needs. He actively mistrusts the discourse of OHS because he believes it threatens his safety and security. Peter is caught in a hard place in which he only trusts himself, his own embodied and common sense knowledge. He also feels powerless to act on his own behalf because any actions he can imagine threaten his concept of who he is, and he is scared to change, yet agency implies change through a striving for an unsure and unpredictable future in which one's identity may be barely recognisable.

I then discussed a story constructed at an OHS course I was facilitating in which workers no longer bring up their safety concerns because they are dismissed by those with the power to authorise changes to their systems, tools and materials. OHS is fuelled by a managerialist discourse that defines truth, sets the agenda and judges knowledge based on its need, not so much to create a safe workplace, but to demonstrate it is fulfilling its duty of care obligations. When a group of workers perceive that their knowledge is not valued by those with power over them, they tend to retreat and withhold their voice. They consent to the status quo rather than agitate for change.

Finally I drew together themes that I identified as present in all three examples that help to answer the research questions. In all three situations workers were skeptical at best as to whether OHS can answer their particular health and safety concerns. In all three, workers refuse to speak up about their concerns because they know they will not be heard and/or they may be misheard, misrepresented, and then taken advantage of. The sensible position to adopt is

to keep quiet, remain loyal to a system that keeps you subjugated, and keep your job, which is the main power they have within this discursive formation.

# Chapter 6. On Becoming an OHS Subject

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## Introduction

In this chapter I explore the constitution of OHS subjectivities and show the intricacies of such a process. The data informing this discussion has been derived from the interviews that I conducted as part of the research project. The headings used throughout this chapter emerged as themes from a close scrutiny of the interview transcripts. Across the wide variety of workplaces and workers represented many key concepts and ideas were discussed by the interview participants. Notwithstanding the similarities generally expressed, the development of OHS subjectivities is always in relationship to something; it is highly dependent on the type of workplace, its cultural norms/expectations, how it is managed, and the particular power dynamics. I demonstrate that OHS is used in many ways and for many purposes; it is confusing, the bearer of many messages, and not straightforward.

OHS is embedded in new relations of power that bring new paradoxes into workplaces as workers are at the same time subject to being acted upon, while they act upon others to achieve contested outcomes. The contemporary approach to OHS, initiated by legislative requirements, ostensibly offers the very real possibility to alter the power dynamics in the workplace by requiring employers to give workers a voice and ensure they contribute to making decisions that affect their health and safety. Power is intrinsic to OHS; it is used in many ways by many people and cannot be avoided. The dilemma faced by workers is in navigating how power is used. All stakeholders are involved in a dance that interplays OHS subjectivity, power and agency – they move and sway as they balance demands on their attention and their actions.

## The interview

In Chapter 3 I spoke of the political nature of interviews and problematised them as a method of data production. The unequal power relations became very clear

during several of the interviews I conducted for this research. For example, one of the participants called Mark, who is well known to me, was really looking forward to the interview because he told me he had a lot to say, and I already knew he carried strong opinions about his experiences of OHS. However, as soon as I turned the tape recorder on, he almost clammed up – he became silent and a reluctant partner in the interview process. The change was dramatic – one minute he is bursting with ideas, and as soon as I turned the tape on, he went quiet. The tape recorder reified the gaze of the other – Mick had interiorised the gaze to such an extent that he became his own overseer, exercising power over and against himself (Foucault, 1980b:155). He lost his creativity and his passion, he became the subjugated subject that he personifies at work. When he is at work, he rarely speaks to management or makes suggestions, he rather seethes at the '*hoi polloi*' (here he is using this phrase to refer to management in the offices, separate from who he calls the workers) when their decisions cause him grief. According to Babette Smith (Smith, 2008:3), he demonstrates clearly the influences of our (Australia's) convict past, by offering mute resistance to authority. His awareness of being captured on tape was further reinforced during the interview when I was probing for more in depth discussion on one particular point that he was making, and he made an obvious gesture to the tape recorder and said '*I've got nothing more to say about that*'.

A similar sequence occurred with another person I interviewed, called Billy. He openly admitted to being nervous about the recording. He felt as though he was being assessed and even asked me if he went '*okay*' once the tape recorder was turned off after the interview. A third interviewee (Rose) asked '*Am I passing*' during the interview, and '*did I pass?*' at the end.

These experiences demonstrate that the recorded interviews differed from my informal conversations with these workers. These particular types of responses to the tape recording could be read as if the workers through this interview process are reduced to a powerlessness as if they are children in school. This in itself reveals much about the constitution of their worker subjectivities and the binary opposition between management (paper based, office workers) and

labourers (manual, working with their bodies, and therefore fearful of, or resistant to, anything that might look like schooling). The interview process creates an unnatural situation in which people feel the gaze on their performance and they may modify their responses for my benefit. I attempt to balance these influences through a combination of my own process of reflexivity, owning my part, acknowledging how the act of recording can influence the dynamics, reassuring the interviewee, placing the recorder in a non-conspicuous place so as not to be the constant reminder of the gaze, using an in-depth questioning approach of active listening, creating a climate of trust, and importantly, providing an atmosphere in which the interviewees feel as though they get something from the interview process. That is, they are giving their time to me freely, the so-called OHS specialist, so I care about them and give my time and energy during the interview to discuss issues of interest to them, that they may be struggling with; I try to help them work out their issues and be an interested sounding board in our conversation together.

For the remainder of this chapter I use the words of the participants to help answer the research questions in terms of the concepts with which I am working in this thesis: language and meaning, subjectivity, discourse and truth, and power and knowledge. It has been discussed throughout this thesis that poststructuralism problematises “truth” and its representation, claiming that, especially in the human sciences, there is no single truth (Richardson, 1997:92), truth is at best partial, relative and dependent on its own discourse for verification – ‘discourse worlds the world’ (Lather, 1993:675). Hence, I do not claim to represent an absolute truth in this chapter but I do maintain that what I present is a fair and ethical representation of the many points of view and the myriad stories told to me. To strengthen the integrity, authenticity, plausibility and criticality (Martin, 2002a:226) of my understanding and presentation of the interview data I have followed several practices. Firstly, I have been rigorous and reflexive in the way I have conducted this research process; an essential part of this reflexivity is that I constantly and iteratively analyse my theorising and, to ensure its applicability, compare it with actual practices that I witness in workplaces. Secondly, I have carefully listened for dissenting voices and the ‘not-so-pretty parts of their stories’ (Lather, 2007:31) so as not to homogenize all

representations, but to crystallize multiple perspectives with a deep, partial and reflexive understanding of the topic and allow the complexity of developing OHS subjectivities to be made conspicuous. Thirdly, I encouraged 'member checks' (Lather, 1993:675; Richardson, 1997:181) or 'reader response theory' (Martin, 2002a:310) by encouraging the interview participants to read the first draft of this chapter and respond; this third dimension gave the reader a chance to 'interpret and resist' (Martin, 2002a:310) my narration and add strength to my argument.

Out of the 17 people whom I interviewed, I asked 15 if they would like to have a copy of the chapter. My actual questions for them were: 'Do you think what I say rings true? Have I made outrageous claims? Do I tell lies? And any other comments that you would like to make'. All 15 said they would like to have a copy to read and comment on, and 9 replied to me with their comments; of these, 8 gave me very encouraging comments such as:

*It sounds quite good....from the perspective of our meeting you are telling the truth.*

*It does ring true within my experiences. It was very interesting to read the comments from others in different fields and recognise the common dilemmas we face. Nice to know you are not alone adrift on this OHS ocean.*

*It certainly rings true....it has given me some great perspectives and new ways to address OHS in my workplace.*

*I read the chapter and it's excellent....I think what Luke said about communication was somehow very important.*

However, one person did not like it because:

*The document is totally different to what I expected. I had expected to see real values and research on training and the value training adds and barriers it faces.*

I can partially explain his stance: he works as an OHS training coordinator and I met him at a conference when I presented a paper titled 'How to Ensure Effective OHS Training'. Originally when I spoke to him my research was going to focus on training; however, it moved away from this to gain a broader perspective on OHS subjectivity.



## Enter OHS

### Many uses

This section explores many of the ways OHS discourse is put to work by a variety of subjects. I demonstrate through the data that OHS discourse is constituted within, and constitutes, relations of power and interest through the language people use, the stories they tell, and their actual workplace practices. Despite the complexities encountered in drawing data from different workplaces with different hazards and risks, and varying levels and types of workers, I draw together certain principles that seem to apply across the data.

I begin this section with cautious, qualified and sometimes contingent observations made by several people who believe that OHS can be good and it is helpful in many ways, not unequivocally, but useful nonetheless. Rose's (a regional manager for a community service organisation) first comments during the interview were:

*Well, I guess I mean it's [OHS] certainly useful, I think it's just necessary really.*

Because if their organisation did not pay attention to OHS

*There would be a lot more injuries and accidents.*

A big motivator for Rose to improve OHS is the cost of injuries, and especially the cost of workers' compensation insurance:

*Like I said, apart from obviously not wanting people to be hurt, we get a monthly report on how much money they are paying out ... 'cause you know how everybody panics when there's a workplace injury and your insurance goes up.*

Rose demonstrates here how her role as manager tends to encourage her to mentally balance the financial costs of injuries against the fact of injuries. Her OHS subjectivity is constituted within the tensions created between an accounting framework that measures costs and benefits, and her empathic desire to keep her workers safe.

Billy is a skilled labourer in the construction industry; his attitudes to safety have changed over time because of injury to his own very personal body:

*Yeah, at first when I was first starting in construction I thought all the safety stuff that we had to go through was a load of bull crap...like it was way over compensated. Now that I have hurt myself, well it only takes a second and a major change in my life now, for the rest of my life, destroyed my leg...since this accident I've been a lot more, I guess twitchier, like scared stuff is going to happen to me.*

Despite his injury, Billy expresses ambivalence towards the usefulness of OHS:

*...this stuff we go through to make things safer would take 10 times longer than actually doing the job a lot of the time, but it's a lot better for us.*

Billy's OHS subjectivity has changed over time because of his injury but he still feels that safe work practices slow the job down. His OHS subjectivity is being developed within a state of anxiety produced through a fear of injury, the risks of working in the construction industry, and the demands for production on construction sites.

Cheryl, from the administration staff of a service provider, and an OHS representative for her workplace, has the opinion that

*I think it works, and it's useful. I really like occ health and safety.*

Once again, its success is not without challenges, especially getting management to prioritise it without her having to push too hard:

*I guess that really the occ health and safety rep needs to be proactive, and not be scared of the boss and that kind of stuff.*

OHS discourse has created new power structures in workplaces that have effects on all workers. Now that she has taken on the role of the OHS rep she has been openly inserted into these new relations of power. She understands that she can now exert her authority in her relations with management, although this is complex work. Cheryl reflects on exchanges she has had with certain managers who she says resist her rightful place as an agent of OHS and marginalise her in her role:

*It has been quite a journey; we had an OHS audit...sprung on me at the last moment. The manager at the time was meant to go through things with me and I was meant to check things with her, but she just basically ignored*

*me. So I found that hard, so I went to another manager who totally ignored me as well. And I was ignored point blank. And I guess it's really hard not to take things like that personally.*

Like Billy, her OHS subjectivity is constituted over time and develops and changes as a result of new learning through actively participating in her specific OHS practices. She suggests that because she feels '*occ health and safety is important*', she took her role of rep seriously and '*nobody was helping me or doing anything, so I became proactive, and put a few people's noses out of joint*'. Although legislation requires employers to provide safe workplaces, the doing of this is not unproblematic and its implementation competes with many priorities. As an elected OHS representative, Cheryl is trying to enact an agentic OHS subject position but is being challenged by the inherent workplace power structures. Even though she is legally invited to speak up through OHS legislation, this speaking is resisted by those who should be hearing, those with the power to make changes, those with the power to invite and welcome her actual speaking. They use their positional power to resist her mandated power by limiting her opportunities to enact her newly forming agency. For Cheryl, OHS has partly become a power struggle for her legitimacy. Even though the organisation complies with the legislative requirement to have an OHS rep, individual managers resist her fulfilling her role at the local level to the extent that their behaviour may be '*less legal in character*' (Foucault, 1976:96) and they use their positional power to '*surmount the rules of right*' (Foucault, 1976:96).

For Rose, Billy and Cheryl the answers to the question 'Does OHS help make your workplace safer?' are always equivocal, always contingent, and always reveal the contested nature of OHS discourse.

Only one person I interviewed had the opinion that OHS has minimal impact at his workplace. Paul, a therapist, discusses how he views OHS:

*I do a report every month. I report on my professional reading, on my occasions of service, on the efficacy of my therapy; I do a 3 page report of statistics. There's not one section on OHS and no one has ever asked me for it. This means it's a non issue 98% of the time...it becomes a non issue for most of us in our workplace.*

His point is that if there is no structure to integrate OHS into common work practices, if it is not prioritised and made a necessary component of his work day, it doesn't even get thought of:

*And most of the time there's no psychology of it being part of our everyday concerns.*

I now delve deeper into Paul's use or non-use of OHS to see how or if he positions himself in relation to it. Despite him saying that OHS is a non-issue, he does sometimes position himself in terms of OHS, although not in the way institutional OHS discourse intends. He and his workmates are aware enough of the power of OHS discourse to use it to their own advantage when they desire, and usually for something that is not specifically related to OHS, but more related to their own agenda. I asked him: 'Do staff bring up OHS issues?' He answered:

*No, rarely, rarely. People may if it suits their purpose; they may say "I don't think we can do that because of OHS". So it will be used when it suits people's purposes.*

For example his organisation has a policy '*somewhere in there it says that there should be no sole workers*'. Yet he exclaims, forcefully noting the inconsistency between codified policy ('*somewhere in there*') and practical application – '*We are almost ALL sole workers!*' His reference to the documented OHS management system as '*somewhere in there*' reveals his almost contempt for, or at least lack of faith in, the ability of the documents to keep him safe. He juxtaposes the theoretical paper knowledge with his real and necessary embodied experience of his workplace practices. He will not advocate for implementation of the sole worker policy because

*The main reason we haven't brought it up is that other places who pushed it have been brought in and they've had to work in the one centre...so if I push for it I'm going to have to drive up to K every day to work, a 40 minute drive, so I tend not to mention it. I think I'm not only going to lose my autonomy, but also service delivery and industrial issues that relate to me working close to home.*

Paul is afraid that if he demands that the policy of no sole workers is enforced he will lose other advantages that he values more highly, such as working close to home and certain industrial issues. He withholds his voice to encourage the

continuation of the status quo of current and historically developed practices. People in his workplace appropriate OHS differentially and for their own purposes. OHS discourse has inserted another trigger into workplace power relations in which workers of all levels and types can use OHS as a lever to have power over others by having decisions made in their favour. As Foucault said, power is not only repressive, it is also productive (Foucault, 1986f:61); it produces effects, and these range from felicitous to harmful and all possible combinations of both, depending on point of view.

Natalie, a manager of a network of several branches of a library, elected by her staff to represent them on the OHS committee, was surprised that some of her manager colleagues were suspicious of her being on the committee.

*Some managers seem a bit suspicious of me and maybe feel threatened, which makes me wonder if I should even be on the committee.*

She believes the managers felt threatened by the fact that encouraging workers to have a voice may undermine their authority, and Natalie, who is supposed to be one of them, feels that she is suspected as being complicit in facilitating this process. Natalie, as a manager, perceives that her OHS subjectivity as a committee member is being constituted by other managers within the binary of us versus them, the so-called oppositional forces between management and workers. Yet the workers (who she manages) elected her to represent them, thereby putting these oppositional categories to work by their refusing to support their mutual exclusivity. In fact, they are using the spark created by the binary as fuel to open up productive possibilities. They use the power of OHS discourse as generative by choosing as their rep a person who already has, and is willing to exercise, a legitimate and powerful voice in workplace relations.

Rose found it very confusing when her organisation tried to use OHS as a lever to eliminate some unsafe working conditions of her staff. She relates a story from her field of experience:

*A service provider down south had withdrawn a service because of OHS reasons because their staff were at risk, and the department came down on them like a ton of bricks. They were saying that you can't discontinue service because of OHS reasons, same story, and instead the only thing the department would accept is if you could prove that you didn't have the*

*resources to provide the care in a safe way. But that's unfair I think, because we've got staff to consider and if we ask them to go into an unsafe workplace then we get it from both sides...and that is confusing.*

Here, Rose as manager is struggling with the pressures of power and influence exerted on her, both from above and from below, so to speak. Where does she position herself? Being a senior manager does not solely position her in a place of having power over others, but inserts her into a complicated pattern of connections and relationships through which she struggles to find her way. At one and the same time she participates in subjectifying others through using her power over, while she is subjectified by that same power, which exerts power over her.

From the above quotes from the interviews it is clear that workers often find OHS confusing, the bearer of many messages, used in many ways and not straightforward. OHS legislation has implanted a new layer of power relations in workplaces in which all workers can claim access to power over other workers or resist perceived power over themselves and always navigate a path between being a subject of power, and subjecting others to their power. Managers and non-managers are all subject to and subjects of the pressures of OHS discourse. It seems that all workers, whether they are from the shop floor or the ranks of senior management, are caught in an OHS discourse that is a web of paradoxes which they are forced to constantly evaluate and speak/act accordingly.

### **Layers of power**

I further explore in this section the new layers of power relations described in the previous section. Some people, especially safety managers, advisers, officers, OHS committee members, OHS representatives, and OHS specialist professionals such as myself, have been newly inserted into these layers of power by an OHS discourse that authorises them to appropriate for themselves certain amounts of power to speak and act. I also examine the language used by the interview participants and how their language constitutes OHS discourse for them. Much of the language employed suggests OHS subjectivities develop within a context of enforcement, compliance, conflict and governance.

According to Paul, many workers '*just see OHS as restrictions*'. Billy described the content of some OHS material that was part of a university course he was doing in order to change careers after his accident.

*The first section of the unit is all about OHS...it goes on about how the employer has a duty to you to make things safe for you, so don't do this, don't do that, so...*

Paul and Billy perceive ohs discourse as rules to follow.

According to Billy's experiences, safety officers are there to enforce safety:

*Yeah, well, you really felt the presence of the safety officer out there, looking over you and watching you, stuff like that, so I guess people made much more efforts with stuff.*

Derek (his real name, as he wanted me to use it), the WorkSafe Victoria OHS rep of the year in 2008, confirms Billy's suggestions; one of his roles as a safety officer is to enforce safe work practices on the sites he goes onto. He negotiated safety bags for his workgroup that contained all their personal protective equipment (PPE):

*And we said we will carry our safety bags at all times. I tell the guys, if we get this agreement and I walk on site and your safety bag's more than 5 metres away from you, I'll kick your arse, right, because we fought for it, we've got an agreement. And these guys were doing it, and I was assisting management in enforcing it.*

Even though Derek is not a manager he has been inserted into a position of power by OHS discourse; Derek enthusiastically now helps management manage by enforcing rules.

Cheryl, the OHS representative, knows that her job is not to enforce OHS, yet she would like to:

*I could be the OHS police. I'd actually like to see people going around checking that occ health and safety in the workplace is being adhered to. I would love to do something like that.*

Cheryl would love to use OHS discourse to give her power over others, and her language reveals that she considers OHS is used to ensure compliance with rules.

Even health and safety committees take on an auditing, investigative and assessment role, as Luke, an OHS professional of 20 years experience explains:

*You often find the committees become inspectors type of thing. Meetings can seem to be taken up by inspections of the workplace to find what's wrong. It's all about finding what's wrong.*

Gary, a safety adviser who I interviewed spoke of this historically produced and lived perception:

*I think generally speaking it has always had that sort of you know, you're the guy with the rule book and you're telling me I'm doing the wrong thing.*

He continues later in the interview:

*Previously a lot of the stuff has been if you do this...you're gonna get into trouble...and you're gonna get a fine, and you're gonna get this and you're gonna get that.*

He highlights his efforts to change this

*A lot of the time it's the change in that perspective or that perception that you're trying to tell them what to do. That's probably the hardest I reckon.*

Gary understands that he, as a workplace safety adviser, the workers at his workplace perceive his role as to 'to tell them what to do' – he names his role as being perceived as potentially having power over people, although he resists and tries to change that perception. The fact that he considers changing these perceptions held by other workers is 'probably the hardest' suggests he considers his position of power is strongly entrenched and presents a considerable challenge to how he views his role.

Natalie's OHS manager questioned why she bought book trolleys for her library staff, finding it difficult to define this as an OHS issue for libraries. He saw it as a cost rather than an investment:

*When I first bought them the OHS officer said to me, oh these are so expensive. Why are you buying these trolleys?*

He questioned Natalie's understanding of hazards and risks for her staff; he debated her claim of what is true, claiming that 'it's not an OHS issue'. However, when she challenged him, he backed down. She sums this up



*Yeah, you just need to get around that, and push your case a bit with him.*

This is interesting in the light of Foucault's (1976:99) suggestion that it is not enough to purely look at the central form of power as exercised by governments and legislation but one needs to examine how it distributes through networks. It can be seen from the data that OHS is operationalised through middle managers who then become the brokers between different levels and types of workers. People are simultaneously subject to this power as they participate in its articulation – they become 'vehicles of power' (Foucault, 1976:98) and not solely 'its point of application' (Foucault, 1976:98). Hence, OHS has expanded the range of subjectivities being offered while it changes power relations of workplaces.

OHS discourse has been developing a set of truth claims and a structure by which those claims can be verified. Concurrently, a group of OHS experts and professionals has grown that contests the right to pronounce the difference between truths and falsehoods. These authorities have been inserted into the capillaries of power that govern OHS and help governments govern from a distance (Edwards & Nicoll, 2006:181). OHS professionals are authorised to make certain and relevant truth claims as 'non-state modes of the exercise of power' (Miller & Rose, 2008:20) as a result of their expert power (McShane, Olekalns, & Travaglione, 2010:385) and are crucial for the successful governance of OHS. Expertise has become fundamental to our contemporary ways of being governed and governing ourselves – experts are the intermediaries between the government/courts and the shaping of the actions of people (Rose, 1999:10). They achieve their success not through the use of force or threat of violence, but by way of the 'persuasion inherent in its truths' (Rose, 1999:10). They facilitate a process to help people internalize the truth claims of the discourse and align their own aspirations and behaviours with them as taking up expertise creates new subject positions for those workers. Hence, they can be powerful in influencing what can be thought and what can be achieved. Workers who do not have or appropriate this expertise may find it difficult to challenge their professional pronouncements as they would need a high degree of self confidence and knowledge of OHS legislation and codes of practice to inform their speaking up.

Safety officers, advisers, managers, representatives and committees constitute another layer, albeit hitherto nebulous and unnamed, woven by OHS discourse into the labyrinth of workplace power relations. They may have at any one workplace influence over bosses and non-bosses, yet at the same time are accountable and subject to those very people as they negotiate outcomes with them that are acceptable to all or any of them. The workers' interpretations of their experiences told to me as stories suggest that OHS discourse interleaves workplace power relations with veins of complexity for workers to navigate. The performance of OHS subjectivities is accomplished as a result of workplace power arrangements, and is sometimes more about power than OHS. The meaning of workplace safety itself easily becomes subservient to the power structures of the workplace as people use the power offered by OHS discourse for many purposes, only some of which are directly related to OHS itself. In this way, OHS is not only constituted within relations of power, but it also constitutes relations of power. The subject is not only constructed by these forces, but actively uses them in the subjectification of others.

It is possible to learn more about these pressures by paying attention to the language people employ when describing their experiences and perceptions of OHS. The language used reveals the tensions, the taken-for-grantednesses of the concepts used and the power of the discourse to limit/influence thinking. Throughout the interviews descriptions such as policing, forcing, catching, penalizing, doing the wrong thing, doing the right thing, insisting, supposed to, should do, meant to, compliant, and so on are regularly applied to OHS implementation. This type of language reinforces the perception that the main thrust of health and safety is enforcement, compliance and reprimands, evidenced by rules, which, if you do not follow, you might be caught and get into trouble. It rests on the assumption that individuals should be blamed and punished for at risk behaviour and implies that if you get injured it is probably your own fault. It places all workers in a positioning of passive subservience to rules and procedures and does not do justice to the philosophy underpinning OHS that aims to engage workers in determining how best to create a safe and healthy workplace. It does not recognise the fact that worker behaviour is heavily influenced, constrained and almost pre-determined by the expectations

put on them and the necessities for production and survival that set the parameters for action in their workplace.

### **Cost versus investment**

According to the interpretations put on their experiences, interview participants in this section tell stories to explain that OHS is often perceived as a burden that slows down work and increases financial costs. It appears that OHS subjectivities are always situated within this tension created between the primary and intrinsic need of business to keep costs to a minimum, and a secondary and extrinsic requirement to keep workers safe.

Luke considers OHS discourse a deficit model and explores this aspect:

*I think OHS is all about negative reinforcement. Yeah, it's avoidance. You can avoid lost time, you can avoid injury, you can avoid losses, of down time, whatever it is, you can avoid higher workers comp by doing it, that's avoidance behaviour, rather than positive reinforcement which is getting the reward, getting rewarded for your actions, as such.*

Good OHS outcomes are achieved by nothing tangible happening, such as no injuries or diseases, so the benefits can be difficult to measure. Gary reflects:

*It takes an incident for people to learn something, and I think it's really unfortunate, that in the safety game, a lot of the time it takes someone to die, or to be seriously injured for people to take notice.*

Therefore it is often perceived that implementing good OHS practices is a cost rather than an investment, and it can be hard to convince the controllers of finance to invest in OHS because it does not easily show an immediate and positive benefit. Terry, a health safety and environment (HSE) training adviser in a large production facility, is struggling with trying to get people to see the positives in safety, especially in getting people to embrace safety training and new practices

*So we can sell the positives; if someone sees personal gain there's more incentives to do it.*

OHS is often felt and expressed as being in tension with production, as Rose says, 'so yes it takes up a fair bit of workload really, the safety issues'. I asked

Mark, a truck driver, if there is anything that can be done to improve the safety of his type of work. He replied:

*Better equipment....all companies have this problem with buying....they want to provide an A class service, with C grade equip.*

Both Rose and Mark explore how OHS is often considered a cost, a burden with negative financial implications.

According to Billy, the construction industry has made many effective improvements in health and safety such as site inductions, tool box talks, safety fencing, job safety analyses (written procedures for safely performing a task) and supervision/enforcement of safe work practices. However, safety is still often perceived as non-core, as in opposition to production because it 'slows down production a lot'. This perception is not limited to the construction industry. Paul explains how OHS has been perceived to reduce production in his field of community service delivery:

*The youth programs are administered in teams now and that is considered very good in terms of OHS, but in terms of service delivery it has been a disaster, and we've copped a lot of criticism from council who provide the buildings to us.*

For Billy and Paul safety is in tension with production. Paul stresses this by referring to the effects of working safely as a 'disaster' and that those with power over them criticize them for the reduced services they provide.

Gary gives a good example of the dilemma companies face when balancing the pressure between costs, production and safety:

*I think safety will intrinsically always slow things down. I think it's always that balancing act between keeping productivity and making it safe... its' mostly production because safety will always slow things down. But then the flipside of that coin to me is that if you don't have any health and safety it gets really slow when someone gets chopped up.*

Here Gary is suggesting that interpreting safety as a costly encumbrance to business is perhaps a short term perspective that does not factor in the expenses incurred through injury. He struggles with convincing management in quantifying how much safety costs, how much it saves, and how it benefits the organisation's bottom line:

*This is what they say to me, justify the amount of money we're saving by doing it. They're saying, this is costing me how much, but how much am I saving? What's the buy back on this?*

Despite this, health and safety outcomes are now becoming a factor in increasing profits in some industries. Gary notes that in his business safety is sometimes paying for itself by winning new work and allowing them to charge clients a premium. If his company can demonstrate that they have a certain quality OHS management system then they can tender for well paying work:

*I said to them if you want us to have a certain type of OHS management system we will have to charge you extra. And they said that's fine. My service manager said this is great but what are we going to do with the money? And I said now we can buy all that stuff, there's no more arguing about it's really too expensive to buy all this stuff.*

Gary is saying here that management are much more willing to invest in safety when they can clearly see a financial benefit. Gary's language reveals his complex position in the organisation that requires 'arguing' when trying to fulfill his job role. As a safety adviser he navigates multiple and competing pressures. His role is to advise on how to keep workers safe, so he must listen to the workers, understand requirements of the regulator, argue with management, and find solutions acceptable to all stakeholders, if he is to be successful.

In this section it has been shown that the implementation of workplace health and safety is often considered as a burden that slows down production and increases costs. As such it resists the efforts of those who champion its benefits. Persons with specific responsibilities for safety as well as all levels of workers, must confront the subsequent marginalization of OHS when resources are allocated. The main thread from this section is that OHS subjectivities are always constituted within the tensions between profits and health and safety. The constitution of OHS subjectivities and the enactment of OHS agency are balancing acts seated firmly in negotiations of power and influence as workers must compete to have health and safety resources allocated.

## **Reporting**

All OHS management systems describe the importance of reporting all injuries or near misses/hits and provide systems for managing such reports. The theory

is that workers can learn from these incidents how to better manage the workplace to minimise their chance of reoccurrence. I now explore some examples of people either not reporting or finding reporting actively discouraged by unspoken cultural norms or the actions and words of others in the workplace. The data describes several reasons people give as to why they do not report or underreport, although many more such stories were told by the participants during the interviews.

Mick, a construction laborer, comments

*If you were to spend all your life putting into the incident book every little cut and scratch you have, you wouldn't ever get any work done. It's a joke. I get bruises and cuts on me every day. It's just how it is. I'm not going to go and say I've skinned my knuckle...if I didn't get a decent bruise on me every week, then, it's like I haven't been at work. It's just the nature of the beast.*

This is consistent with research into many types of masculine workplaces that require a certain toughness to survive (Beale, 2001; Connell, 2000, 2002; Flood, 2002; Pease, 2000; Somerville, 2005). OHS subjectivities are constructed much differently in construction workplaces than, say, academic workplaces; in construction, one must expect to get 'decent' injuries regularly. Hazards and risks seem to be relative rather than absolute, as these regular injuries would not be tolerated in many other workplaces. Hence, OHS subjectivities are relational and their development is contingent on the particular workplace in question.

Some people do not report incidents because they feel as though they will get into trouble. Terry, the safety adviser who is trying to change this, laments

*Discipline and negativity to the workforce are the biggest stiflers of hazard identification, near miss reporting and incident reporting...if you smack someone over the wrist when they reported it the next lot will say, well I won't report it because I know if I put my hand up, it's going to get chopped off.*

This is a very interesting use of language and inverts the way the body works in regard to safety here. The safety adviser is saying that the perceived impact of reporting can be symbolically worse than the reporting itself because his hand will get chopped off rather than smacked, and the 'hand will get chopped off' for

revealing their hidden knowledge of what actually goes on at the workplace that has repercussions for health and safety. If my hand will get chopped off, I will definitely maintain the secret, no matter how much I am exhorted to speak. This *'discipline and negativity'* is perceived by Terry as metaphorically violent and Foucault (1980b:155) warns that if you use violent interventions 'you risk provoking revolts....allowing politically costly phenomena of resistance and disobedience to develop'. Consequently, people resist entreaty, remain mute, and safeguard their secret knowledge.

People who report can be perceived as trouble makers, or at least they feel as though that is how they are received. Colin, a university lecturer and a recently elected member of the OHS committee, explains his point of view:

*I think it's a question that comes back to, when you're standing up to your bosses you've always got that element of if I start making waves, I get noticed, so there's always that sense of fear.*

Colin's language is situated in the binary of us and them, of boss versus worker. This binary for Colin is a signifying space (Davies, 2000:38) which gives him a language to explore his position in the employment contract. He is a relatively young worker and a newly appointed academic and has a fear of being labeled a trouble maker early in his career. The discourse of management prerogative constitutes him as an acquiescent worker who does not accept the invitation of OHS rhetoric to voice his concerns because exercising voice equates with *'standing up to your bosses'*. His OHS subjectivity is primarily constituted in relation to power, and only secondarily grounded in OHS.

Gary believes the extent of reporting is related to whether employees recognise that their management is serious about safety

*The guys on the ground see that the employers or their managers are serious about it, and they're not gonna get themselves laughed at or in trouble if they say, look, I think this is bloody dangerous, could we do something about it? Yeah, a lot of the time it is that they are more afraid of being that sort of trouble maker, and it's causing trouble for the bosses.*

For Gary, being a trouble maker means making *'trouble for the bosses'*, and, for him, sharing one's knowledge about the workplace can be perceived as making trouble for the boss because it interrupts the boss's focus on production. The

inference may be that if one makes trouble, one becomes less valuable to the boss. Notifying incidents in this example means distracting business away from its serious and core activity, which then denotes the perpetrator as not serious. The notifier is turned from a subject into an object, which is more easily conceptualised as worthy of ridicule.

Terry, Colin and Gary all relate the tendency to not report incidents to fear of getting into trouble for reporting. The use of, or the potential to use, sovereign power, has a powerful symbolic effect on workers and they will not speak up if it is not considered safe to do so. This is another example of how the constitution of OHS subjectivities has more to do with power than OHS and where people sit in relation to power must be addressed for people to embrace an agentic subject position.

Some people will not report because they have learned that those with the power to allocate resources do not care about workers concerns, they just care about getting the job done with minimum effort. Zella describes what it was like in her last child care facility:

*One of the biggest things about my last centre was the director was not a good role model. If you'd say hey this is really hard, or like this is happening because of this, you didn't get any support for that. It'd be like [simulating shouting] WELL WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO ABOUT IT? YOU'RE JUST MAKING MY LIFE HARDER...JUST SORT IT OUT, JUST DO IT, I USED TO RUN A ROOM WITH 15 KIDS ON MY OWN! And it's like, well I just won't ask for anything or just won't tell you.*

Zella tells this story to illustrate that she will not reveal her knowledge to a person with power over her if they belittle her knowledge, and in the previous quote, Gary referred to workers' reluctance to report if they will get '*laughed at*'. Workers who report can be positioned in a place of derision through negative reinforcement from those who matter to them, which they dislike and strive to avoid. Zella perceives that her manager does not value her thoughts or voice, only her ability to get the job done easily without fuss.

Lawrence, a retired maintenance fitter/mechanic with probably 50 years experience in industrial worksites, explains that traditionally you didn't report because '*injured workers are a pain in the arse*'. When I asked him if some



people did not report injuries he elaborates by describing a system that ostensibly rewarded good health and safety outcomes, but actually encouraged under reporting:

*Oh yes, it was quite common! Quite a few jobs had the bonus system, whereby if you didn't have any accidents you could have got \$50 or \$60 at the end of the year; we'd get away with a year or two and make a quid, and then there used to be spates of accidents whereby we'd decry each other for bugging up our bonus. Yeah, you useless bastard, we'd say, there goes our bonus, unsympathetic to the guy. Yeah, Joe Blow ruined our bonus this year.*

Lawrence raises complex issues here, not least of which reveals the power dynamics within the team of workers. This is not simply a sovereign power over workers based on immediate threat of punishment, but more an example of governmentality in which workers have internalized rules and norms and use them to govern their own behaviours and that of others. They have collectively internalized the goal of working for the bonus; the fact that they would 'decry each other' for being 'useless' suggests they had also deeply internalized the concept that one's safety was one's own responsibility, which was shown in chapter 2 to be an historically generated necessity developed by workers confronted with workplaces that did not value their health and safety.

Terry has been introducing a documented reporting system at work that he says is both easy to fill in and will always generate a response. He is hopeful this will go some way to increasing the quantity and quality of reports.

*One of the problems that everywhere has is that people will say, oh I've reported that, we've been reporting that for 2 or 3 yrs, and nothing's happened. With this new system I'll guarantee you, something will happen; whether it's what we want to happen, may be a different story.*

When I asked if this new system has helped increase reporting he suggests 'we've doubled it'. He defines this increase in hazard and near miss reports as a positive OHS indicator because it means people are now speaking up more than before as a consequence of feeling heard. Terry is going to the heart of whose knowledge is considered valuable. The knowledge a worker has about the hazards and risks at work is founded on and located in their embodied experiences of their workplace. It is often perceived by these workers that their

knowledge is not valued by management, especially if your hand *'will get chopped off'* for speaking your knowledge. The Cartesian mind/body split that privileges mind over body helps confirm the power arrangements at work by privileging the cognitive and paper knowledge of managers and discrediting the embodied knowledge of the worker. This makes OHS complex because OHS is about bodies, about keeping bodies safe. Yet, if workers speak about the real body and its real encounters, they are treated with disrespect and punished through some form of censure. Terry has increased the notifying of incidents by introducing a system that guarantees the workers will be heard and will not be punished, thereby sending the message that their knowledge is valued by management. He bridges the gap between codified and embodied knowledge by encouraging workers to convert their practical knowledge into paper knowledge and to value this transmutation.

The decision whether to report or not is complicated by many factors, some of which may have very little to do with OHS. For instance, reporting can be used as a power play where people use the system to exert power over others, or at least it can be interpreted as such. Ivan, a middle manager from a local government organisation, tells his story about such a situation:

*There's been a couple of reports that have come up through the committee and you could almost call them vexatious. Two engineers went into a worksite being controlled by a traffic controller to have a look at a particular issue – neither of them were wearing vests. The worker, traffic controller, let them in and then filled in a near miss form about them not wearing vests.*

Ivan is concerned here by the reaction of road workers when an engineer did not wear his safety vest on their site. The road workers used the incident report form to complain, and Ivan the manager thought this was petty of them; he disliked their temerity to use a management system to disempower management. He did not understand how symbolic the actions of the engineers and the road workers were in terms of power relations. This situation demonstrates a discontinuity between what the formal OHS system ordains and what people actually do, and especially what management does. The system and rules have been developed and written by management and when management does not follow the safety rules workers REALLY notice it. All employees and bosses wearing the same

appropriate PPE 'can be interpreted as a temporary reduction of management-labour inequality and as a tacit acknowledgement of the importance and difficulty [read 'danger'] of lower ranking jobs' (Martin, 2002a:70). When management does not partake in this ritual (as in the example above) it magnifies the inequalities.

It can be seen by Ivan's quote that OHS has reconstituted power relations between different levels of workers by providing opportunities and imperatives to act differently. OHS discourse is not only being mobilized by the traffic controller when he exerts his newly authorised power to speak up, but the traffic controller's, engineers', and Ivan's subjectivities are being constituted by OHS discourse in the process of speaking up – they are all becoming new subjects. Ivan resists the implication that he now can sometimes be subservient and subordinate to lower level workers by referring to the actions of these workers as '*vexatious*', while lower level workers take advantage of the opportunity to challenge management prerogative. It is not made easy for people such as this traffic controller to speak in ways that disrupt the current discourse of management prerogative, even though the newly forming OHS discourse invites him to do so. When he does speak up he is confronted by the entrenched workplace power dynamics that treat workers as lacking important knowledge and managers as knowledgeable. Ivan's story speaks of how OHS sits within our economic system that values different kinds of knowledge and the hierarchies of power that are created through that valuing system. The traffic controller adopts an agentic OHS subject position as he exercises this right to speak and be heard, which is consistent with a poststructuralist concept of agency because his action challenges hegemonic forms of power (Davies, 2000:67).

As in the previous 3 sections of this chapter, the data presented in this section comes from several industries and several levels and type of worker and reveals many diverse issues. I am not trying to make generalisations across this diversified mix but I think I can extract some principles that apply generally to many workplaces. This section on reporting has demonstrated that workers regularly do not report incidents, hazards or risks for a variety of reasons, many

of which relate to their perception that reporting will produce negative consequences. This censure is never part of the institutional and documented OHS management system, but belongs in the shadows and can be more powerful than what is espoused as official and legitimate. The data suggests that the development of OHS subjectivities is relative and relational, and highly dependent on the type of workplace, its cultural norms, and how the power dynamics are managed and interpreted. People are loathe to speak up when it is not safe to do so and OHS subjectivities are constituted firstly in relation to power and only secondarily in relation to OHS. However, OHS discourse has provided an opportunity to change these power relations and reporting provides one arena that can be used to exert agency and challenge the status quo.

### **Liability and paperwork, or health and safety?**

In this section of the chapter extracts from interviews suggest that all levels and types of workers represented in the data, from many industries, struggle with and can be confused by the tensions generated between liability inspired paperwork and actually creating safe workplaces. This is another extremely complex issue because management do need to protect themselves from the quite serious implications of legal cases against them, and the courts do highly regard documentation as substantive evidence.

I asked Mark whether his medium size trucking company has a written health and safety policy. He replied

*You have to. To get the contracts that we had you have to have a statement and everything, and for those bigger contracts you have to have all of that, it's part of the bidding process.*

He affirms that his company has to have an OHS management system to be able to tender for the big contracts; he is silent here about how this '*statement and everything*' actually makes his workplace safer. Later in the interview, however, he juxtaposes the paper based system with his own approach grounded in praxis:

*Well I think it's all paperwork now, I mean it's common sense...*

He holds at the same time contradictory subject positions in regard to OHS discourse rather than one unified OHS identity. Mark reveals that he understands OHS to consist of two separate elements, akin to the two strands discussed throughout this thesis – the inevitable paperwork has power as it insists on its completion, but he keeps safe by using his common sense, which, as we have seen, is not enough to ensure people's health and safety and tends to allow the status quo to dominate by normalising current practices and eschewing thoughts or discussions for change. This tension between codified knowledge and praxis derived knowledge is not a simple us versus them binary, nor can it be merely mentally categorised as clearly oppositional. No, it is a complex tension that creates an unease and disquiet while it erodes away belief that OHS is an exciting opportunity to improve worker wellbeing.

In some industries, continued accreditation as a business requires a documented health and safety management system:

*The government brought in that to get their accreditation they had to be audited in a lot of different areas, including occupational health and safety.*

However, there is no actual legislated requirement for such paper based systems and organisations have inferred the need as a response to the onus of proof in the courts. Now they surveil each other to ensure, at the least, the existence of these documented systems. Nevertheless, these paperwork systems do not necessarily translate into safer workplaces, especially if their main goals are to be awarded the contract and/or to protect from liability. For example, Zella was complaining about the many poor practices in her industry across many child care centres she had experienced. I asked her 'But aren't there accreditation guidelines?' She replied:

*Yes but they give you a year's notice to prepare your centre for this one day, and then they come in and watch you, and it's so easy to fake it; and that's so basic as well, it's saying that you have to be not a really bad centre, it's not saying you have to be a really good centre.*

Zella's experience is that written descriptions do not always reflect what actually happens in practice.

This brings me back to a topic explored earlier in this thesis, that of the existence of two streams or strands of OHS in workplaces, analogous to the Cartesian mind/body split that privileges mind over body. One strand is the codified or paper system based on conceptual thinking and formulated in the written word; the other is the actions/practices of people based on embodied experience and 'common sense'. The paper stream is privileged by the employer because it is this system that they perceive as protecting them from liability while the praxis stream is more highly regarded by workers to protect their bodies. Rose explained the manager's perspective:

*We document everything as if we're paranoid really, for liability purposes.*

The focus on liability as the priority rather than safety tends to make getting the paperwork right more important than getting the safety right. Billy speaks of his experience on a large civil construction site:

*Billy: And every time a person who comes into the area and starts working would have to sign the jsa. But I remember heaps of times they wouldn't really go through it properly, but like at the start you kind of go over it.*

*Phil: So would the blokes ever say don't go through it, we'll just sign it?*

*Billy: Yeah, I think sometimes I noticed they would probably get people to sign a blank thing and then write up the jsa after. But most of the jsa's that would get written up, they'd say come up with at least 3 things so as soon as you get 3 things then you just like, you know, that's fine.*

Here Billy is suggesting that getting the paperwork right is considered more important than giving a good induction and the people resist and subvert by exploiting loopholes – the important thing in their story is to get the signatures rather than discuss the hazards. He reveals the forces in play; management know workers subvert so 'they' tell them to at least put '3 things' (that is, hazards that may be encountered during the day's work) on the jsa for it to be considered valid. Worker knowledge will be validated when they can write down three hazards. The hidden agenda is that 'they' (the people with management power and responsibility) consider '3 things' will suffice to demonstrate their duty of care. The workers are happy to have this clear guideline to make their induction valid so they can please management and get on with the important thing of getting the job done. OHS has inserted Billy and his co-workers into complex

games of power that hitherto did not exist. On the surface, ostensibly and as a show or performance for the benefit of the courts, Billy, the construction workers, the safety officers, management, and perhaps even WorkCover inspectors, perform the OHS dance that consists of structured and scripted moves, plays and counter plays. All the actors know their role and take up their positions. This outward show, however, is based on hidden rules of engagement that are never articulated and sit comfortably within an economic discourse that expects workers to do what is required to get the job done.

Paul feels that when paperwork is more about liability than safety it often does not reflect what workers do:

*They are very broad, the more you look in terms of legal liability, insurance company stuff. Some of these things are so broad that you've gotta go to the nth degree, to capture every likelihood. So when people go to the nth, they see it as irrelevant rubbish, so then they don't carry it out.*

Paul is suggesting the focus on legal liability rather than safety can result in a system of 'irrelevant' rules that people think are 'rubbish' and therefore do not 'carry out'. Workers themselves decide what is relevant/irrelevant, based on the demands of the particular workplace. Management often knows this but may turn a blind eye to get the job done. Billy tells a story with a similar theme from construction sites that suggests the generic nature of this type of thinking and behaviour:

*I'd put a harness on when I was in a cherry picker and hang out the side, jump out of the cherry picker underneath bridges. But if I fell from that I'd be in a lot of trouble. But it was like the bosses know that that stuff is going on and they turn a blind eye as long as you are doing the job.*

Billy's language reveals some of the dilemmas he has faced working in the construction industry. In reality, if he did fall, he would suffer terrible injuries, yet he focuses solely on the fact that he would get into trouble because he was not following procedures. He construes the pressure as obviously to get the work done because management allows you to break the rules 'as long as you are doing the job'. However, the tension is created by him knowing that he must take responsibility for his own safety while breaking those rules because

management will blame you for being injured rather than support you for trying to be productive.

A regular theme that occurs throughout the data, across industries and different levels of worker, is that quite a lot of “pretending” happens in OHS, that is, pretending that something is one thing when everyone knows that it is clearly another as workers at all levels feign compliance. Derek, the OHS rep of the year, is frustrated by the mismatch between what the procedures or “rule book” says and what are actually safe working practices. His big problem is that his team’s site behaviours must comply with worldwide safety standards set by the offshore office of his multi-national company, and these do not always reflect the local conditions, strategies and developments:

*We have worldwide job safety standards and management is mainly bothered about them rather than what the OHS Act or Regulation says. A typical example: their policy says that you will wear a safety harness in the lift shaft at all times, right. We’re saying we don’t need it because we’ve developed a better system. They don’t look at the actual safety, they look at the book.*

Consequently they often pretend to follow these rules just for the auditors and even his manager becomes implicated because no one is exempt from or external to the games of power (Valentine, 2002:51):

*It’s not a case of what you are actually doing, it’s what you are being seen to be doing. The manager rings us up to warn us half an hour before the auditors come so they can see us wearing the harnesses.*

The pretence, and dilemma faced by the workers/tradespeople and the workers/managers, is how they can have the paperwork in order to satisfy the auditors and at the same time do what needs to be done. They all participate in the dance, and power plays the tune.

Despite the quandary that many workers find themselves in when navigating between the many competing pressures and demands, 100% of people who were interviewed as part of this research have seen many improvements in their health and safety at work since the surge in OHS that has resulted from legislative pushes over the last 10 years or so. Even Paul, who was quoted



earlier as saying OHS has not had significant impact at his workplace, concedes:

*I think it does make a difference, absolutely, because we never checked electrical before, and I can remember things burning out, you'd burn your fingers because...I remember using toasters and things that people would wrap a bit of electrical tape around, or sticky tape, absolutely.*

In this section I have explored the tensions between liability inspired paperwork, rules and procedures, and praxis oriented behaviours rooted in the demands of the workplace. This is perhaps the fundamental crux of the dilemmas outlined in this thesis in terms of OHS management and the development of OHS subjectivity. It is within the context of these pressures that all stakeholders move and sway as they balance demands on their attention, time and actions. The very real threat of liability exerts its power and envelops all who inhabit the world of work. All workers must dance to the music orchestrated by power, and, within this confusion and uncertainty, envision paths to creating safer workplaces. OHS discourse, then, is constituted through power and cannot be separated from power; the inference is that the sites of power need to be named and explored for people to actively participate in constituting their workplaces as a place of health, safety and wellbeing.

## **OHS Consultation**

In this section I move the data presentation and analysis to the topic of OHS consultation in an effort to answer the third research question: How do workers learn to become effective OHS consultative subjects? What I discovered was a seething foment of confusion, tension and struggle, tempered by some improvements achieved through using consultation mechanisms, albeit these improvements are almost always contested.

According to Lawrence, historically workers have not been encouraged to speak up. He remembers doing maintenance work in the 1970's and 1980's:

*There was no safety as part of every job that you went to, there was no discussion, you were just one of the worker bees, that's all it was, there was no discussion about what went wrong or how to do anything.*

Lawrence tells his interpretation of what it was like for him to work in those days. According to his story, workers were not constituted as speaking subjects, but were ‘*worker bees*’ whose role was purely to get the job done.

Zella understands that it is common in child care centres, with mainly female workers, to accept the dangers of the job and therefore either not recognise those dangers or not speak them:

*We’re not taken seriously, we’re just doing women’s’ work so we shouldn’t complain, that’s just what we should do. I think that’s why a lot of women that work in it don’t respect themselves doing it, so then they don’t feel like they have a right to speak up.*

This suggests that the wider societal culture influences peoples’ willingness and/or ability to speak up at work. These child care workers position themselves in a place of received powerlessness that seems to them to be self-evident, natural and normal. I infer from this that they may not be aware that this is a disempowered state that precludes them from exercising agentic action, and note that this is an interesting example of how a discourse limits both thought and action as it constitutes subjects.

In other workplaces, such as libraries, workers can see no need to speak up because traditionally their work has not been considered dangerous. Natalie wanted to become the OHS representative for her network of libraries

*Because I don’t feel that libraries are recognised, and being a library manager I’ve had issues which I’ve felt have been shrugged off.*

Natalie, as a manager, has a certain amount of legitimate power in her workplace that derives from the authority bestowed by her job position. But even she feels that she has been ‘*shrugged off*’ because OHS in libraries has been mostly underrated or invisible, which has therefore almost eliminated the opportunity to constitute oneself as an OHS subject or constitute one’s workplace as subject to and a subject of OHS discourse. Now, however, OHS discourse has given her new potential to make her concerns heard – the OHS representative is formally inserted or delicately spliced into workplace power arrangements and by definition is to be given a voice that must be listened to.

I asked her if she thought library staff historically minimise their own risks because of the perceived nature of the work and she replied:

*Oh look, of course we do! I introduced basket trolleys with wheels which can carry 15 books. But some of the staff go, oh it's so expensive. Spend the money on books, don't waste it on us! But, when I said no, this is an OHS issue you really do need to use them and look how much easier it makes your job. Then they're fine, but some of them still prefer to give them to the public and still carry the books to the shelf.*

Some of Natalie's staff disagreed with her interpretations of what is good for them – they put more value in looking after their customers than looking after themselves. The top-down approach to OHS tends to not only discourage workers from speaking up but it also may encourage them to enact local forms of resistance, which may even be counter-productive to their own health and safety. In Natalie's story above, some library workers, who have been told to use the trolleys, resist by still giving them to members of the public and thereby increasing their own risks. It is interesting to me, yet difficult for Natalie, how she must manoeuvre her way through the power maze in which she is interpolated. She is a manager with power over her staff, yet they have elected her as their representative to use this newly created position of power in their interest. It is awkward for all of them because if she tells them what to do by virtue of her authority, is she discouraging them from speaking up for fear of censure? They may be willing to take this risk because when she speaks for them as their rep she may command additional power because of her manager status. It is a fine thread she weaves.

Library workers historically have not been made aware that OHS applies to them and Natalie perceives that being on the OHS committee has helped *raise awareness with other staff*. She believes that she is successfully using her double or dual positions of power to improve the OHS of her staff by increasing their profile and relevance.

Cheryl sometimes finds consulting with workers confusing, conflictual, time consuming and disorienting:

*I just think, things that make it difficult are a lot of people getting in the way. You get a lot of people coming up with all these various solutions from their*

*own perspectives, which sometimes might be good. But it gets in the way when there is a big full room discussion, and for me that's frustrating.*

The amazing irony here is that Cheryl likes her new found power as an OHS rep; she embraces it as the shepherd her flock (Rose, 2007:73), or the well meaning parent trying to protect her children because she knows what is best for them. She struggles with actually consulting with the workers she represents because she finds that their ideas are multiple and fractured and interfere with her smooth plans for making their workplace safe, although, of course, from her perspective. Cheryl as OHS rep uses her new form of power not to actually represent or consult with her work group but to continue the 'subjugating relationship' (Foucault, 1980c:86) of the status quo that subjugates local and discontinuous knowledges that are 'incapable of unanimity' (Foucault, 1980c:82). Even though she has their best interests in her heart, she discourages their speaking up.

Luke has had a lot of experience training and mentoring OHS committees; he discusses what factors he has noticed either increase or decrease their effectiveness:

*The worst committees to work with are the ones that are set up by the safety people because usually it was the safety person, the safety manager, safety officer who wanted to run it. They might have an employee chairing it and all of that, but they would be driving it. So they find it very very difficult to let go of the reins.*

Luke here captures one of the enigmas of health and safety consultation that Cheryl alluded to in the previous quote. He signals how power acts as the hidden caller as it provides the cues for the players in the OHS dance. In Luke's example the health and safety manager is using her/his positional power (McShane, et al., 2010:467) to try to ensure an effective OHS committee. However, in doing so, (s)he may, like Cheryl, subjugate naïve voices, albeit, unintentionally. Precisely because the safety manager finds it '*very very difficult to let go of the reins*', the less informed, less knowledgeable employees (in terms of the truth claims of OHS discourse) may not speak up because their voices are not so well organised, may be tentative and fractured, and 'low ranking...popular knowledge' (Foucault, 1980c:82) that is not based in science but embodied praxis.

A cornerstone of OHS consultation legislation is for the employer to share information about occupational health, safety and welfare with employees, provide them with an opportunity to make OHS suggestions, and take these suggestions into account when making decisions about OHS. Even the new yet to be enacted national model OHS Act requires that 'relevant information about the matter is shared with the workers' (SafeWork Australia, 2009: Section 41(1)(a)). These are not very strong consultative provisions and are very paternalistic in terms of who decides what are relevant issues. It supports the tendency described in this thesis of management deciding what is best for workers by developing OHS management systems that prescribe worker behaviour and imply that workers will be safe if they follow the rules designed for them. It implies that managers know best and is akin to a pastoral type of care. This goes to the heart of who defines what are OHS issues which is shown as contested terrain throughout the interviews.

Terry tries to interpret how power influences consultation arrangements:

*If you've got the CEO sitting in on the committee, how will an employee, even if they are the chairperson challenge the CEO?*

Here Terry thinks that it can be very difficult to challenge the status quo when you are face to face with sovereign power. People may be scared to say things that either may get them or others into trouble, so they remain mute. Even though the new OHS legislative framework says you can question authority regarding OHS, if you choose to do so the ramifications can be unpalatable and threatening. Hence, people can be loathe to speak up if it is not safe to do so. Paul tells a story to demonstrate how he perceives this at his workplace:

*One person told the senior manager they were having problems with some difficult older kids and she closed the whole program down. So why would you want to talk about things that are unsafe. I remember hearing someone say after that, don't tell her anything.*

Paul is exploring at least two meanings of the word 'safe' here. Firstly he is describing how a senior manager overreacted when safety concerns were raised about a particular youth program by closing it down. The workers raised the issue to try and find a resolution, not to close it down; they were very upset at this outcome. The second meaning of 'safe' referred to is more a

psychological/emotional safety where people do not feel safe to inform senior management of their concerns. The effects of consultation are not homogenous, and Paul's story demonstrates that speaking up and sharing information can produce unforeseen outcomes. In this instance the outcomes reflect the imbalances of power and entrench people further in their acts of resistance of withholding their knowledge. They cauterize their speaking and abdicate their role as speaking subjects, giving their passive consent to the status quo rather than using their active voice to negotiate a better or different future.

There are a number of unspoken problems with engaging workers in the consultation process. For instance, what does it mean for workers to speak up, have voice, and contribute their ideas to decision making? Workers are not an amorphous mass who speak with one voice – there are as many opinions as there are workers, and each opinion is a reflection of how the person perceives themselves in relation to their world, each opinion carries the history and weight of a life lead, it is suffused with subtleties of personal agendas. Even when workers are invited to speak up, such as at staff meetings, tool box talks, through OHS committees or representatives or when asked to conduct or review risk assessments and safe work procedures they do not always avail themselves of this opportunity. They may not speak up because they feel intimidated by the presence of those people who have power over them in their normal work day.

So far the data suggests that being an OHS representative or on an OHS committee does not unproblematically lead to the positive and easy communication that effective OHS consultation requires. A most interesting concept that is consistently emerging from the data across many workplaces and levels of worker is the constitution of the OHS rep, adviser, manager, trainer and many other types of worker as a new subject position in workplaces and where and how that works in relation to other forms of power. For example, in a previous workplace, Mick was on their safety committees

*That's only because I wanted to be on them. I made a bit of noise and they voted me in because I wasn't afraid to say things.*

Mick makes reference to how the forces of power intervene in the consultation process and he believes workers can be intimidated and ‘*afraid to say things*’ because it can get them into trouble ‘*with the boss*’. Mark feels this and even though he sometimes exercises his voice as an individual, he would not be on a committee because

*It doesn't interest me; I don't think I could handle the argy-bargy with the management. It would drive me nuts.*

Mark reveals that consultation is a contested terrain and successful outcomes are by no means guaranteed. To become a consultative OHS subject one needs to position oneself in this pressure zone.

Even though Natalie is a firm believer in the usefulness of OHS consultation and the OHS committee, she points out that the process of achieving outcomes is fraught with difficulties. She described to me what unfolded for her when management made an executive decision to amalgamate male and female toilets into a unisex block without consulting with the workers who were affected by such a change:

*We had that amenities decision reversed. But that was very nasty. I was hauled into the HR managers office, and given a very strict lecture that it was not an OHS issue. But I just stuck to it, and she was not happy, and I ended up in tears.*

The struggle that Natalie experienced in exercising her right to represent her workgroup triggers language that reflects a contest, battle or fight, with the result described as ‘*Yeah, we won that one*’. While the language of much OHS is about compliance, the language of consultation is often the language of conflict. Derek, the OHS rep of the year, says of his role:

*I've been doing it for 9 years and it's a constant battle, it really is.*

He is fighting and he is motivated by an altruistic desire of caring enough for his workers to do everything in his power to keep them safe; he continues:

*Some of this battle is about making sure my blokes go home tonight.*

In achieving this level of safety he fights with other workers, the regulator, management, international auditors and principal contractors. It is not just a

simple us versus them such as workers versus management. In a previous section of this chapter Derek revealed that he even fights with the workers he represents, while taking sides with management. So, the contestations for OHS reps are multiple and often pull in opposite, adjacent or tangential directions.

Natalie, the library rep understands many of the complexities of these contests. She saves her efforts for those fights she can win by choosing when to make a stand:

*I mean that was why I was really pushing it. It was basically the straw that was breaking the camel's back. This one I could use. And I thought no, I'm not gonna let this one get away.*

The fact that she does this and has 'won' some of these battles has singled her out to both management and workers, each for different reasons. Management now are wary of her because she knows how to represent her team:

*I notice now, with the assets manager, whenever my name comes up, he goes straight to my manager to say, what's she on about now?*

I spoke earlier that Natalie negotiates multiple roles and positions of power in combining her job as manager with her functions as the OHS rep. Her OHS subjectivity is constituted within these dynamics. According to her she balances these requirements successfully because employees now come eagerly to her and say 'look, will you take this to the committee?' However, she is not looking for a fight or to be a crusader, so she encourages them to resolve their issues at their own staff meetings:

*And I notice now that when they come to me and say will you take this to the OHS committee, and I say have you tabled it first at your staff meetings? And they look at me puzzled. But I say do that first, and then I'll act upon it if you don't get anywhere.*

They are sometimes surprised by her response but she is teaching them to use their own voices. Natalie tries to navigate through the power maze that her multiple positions create.

People may choose not to speak up when they perceive that safety is not held as important as other more core issues such as production or quality. Terry explains:



*The tool box talks here are one of our areas that need dramatic improvement. They will talk about production, quality efficiency, man hours and then they'll put in a 5 or 10 minuter on safety. Quite often you will find that the safety is the smallest component, and if anywhere gets trimmed, it'll be safety first.*

OHS is often espoused as being a number one priority in policies, yet, in actual practice, it is relegated to the sidelines, as subsidiary and peripheral. In Terry's opinion the barely concealed message is that worker safety is not core but is addressed if there is time. And who decides if there is time? Not the people whose bodies face the most risk, but those who direct their activities, the managers, whom Terry refers to as 'they'. Cheryl tells a story about similar types of experiences she has had:

*I called an occ health and safety meeting one day to take them through the whole procedure of opening up, lock down, shutting up, so I did, and that took well over an hour and then at the end of it the manager said oh well we haven't got time now for anything else; I didn't know you were going to take so long. And then at the next staff meeting she said is there anything to report in occ health and safety, but please keep it short! And I must admit I was upset, and I just felt the tears spring immediately and I said no I haven't got anything to report for occ health and safety, I said it's too hard, it's just too hard.*

When OHS is marginalised by those with more authority/power than her, she is marginalised; she then does not speak up, silences herself, doubts herself as an OHS rep and as a person. Cheryl is being constituted as a peripheral subject and her OHS subjectivity develops to a large degree 'as a result of the effects of power' (Foucault, 1976:98). Luckily for her (and the organisation), her workmates gave her the support she is not getting from management:

*It just came out of my mouth so everybody started telling me what a great job I was doing and how much they appreciated what I was doing and I got all teary eyed and I just said that I feel totally, totally worthless, and I just get ignored, nobody's really interested in what I do, I'm feeling pretty negative about the whole thing. It didn't change anything because even though I got support from other people, I didn't get it from the person I needed help from.*

However, support from workmates is not as effective as that from management, as they have the power to make the decisions regarding whose knowledge is valued and to a large extent whose knowledge remains subjugated. To be fair, managers are workers too and they do not necessarily silence workers

deliberately, but act within the power dynamics at their particular workplace. This struggle exists within the parameters of who defines what is an OHS issue, who has the right to make decisions, who has power and over whom can this power be exerted, and who, why and how people resist this power. Cheryl's OHS subjectivity must be constructed within this fraught terrain and risks being cauterized by a managerialist discourse that consigns OHS (and therefore her) to the periphery.

It can be inferred from the preceding discussions that OHS consultation is directly related to how power is used in workplaces and cannot be separated from power. OHS consultation offers new storylines to be written and enacted, it offers new ways of constituting working subjects, but subjectivity is always produced by power and acted on by power (Fenwick, 2006b:27).

The legislative requirement to consult is an attempt by governments to validate the heretofore almost secret knowledge held by the so-called lower ranking workers. Historically workers developed practices enshrined in the tacit knowledge of common sense to keep their bodies safe in the face of hazards and risks. These local knowledges about how their bodies interact with workplace systems and processes have been subjugated in that they rarely appear in the formal and functionalist systematization (Foucault, 1980c:81) of OHS policies and procedures: embodied and practical knowledge is not given as much weight as cognitive and theoretical knowledge. However, it may be that uncovering and celebrating these subjugated knowledges can rupture the damaging processes of the workplaces that functionalist and systematizing thought have not captured. This is not easy because these subjugated knowledges have been disqualified as inadequate or too naïve to be considered credible (Foucault, 1980c:81). What's more, as the data shows, these knowledges often surface as complaints or dissatisfactions that can be perceived as questioning management's performance. Foucault (1980c:82) argues forcefully that it is precisely through these particular, local and differential knowledges that criticism performs its work. These disqualified and subjugated knowledges contain within them the histories of the local struggles and can be

used tactically (Foucault, 1980c:83) to understand and improve the OHS situation at particular workplaces.

## **A politics of hope**

In this section I aim to piece together from the interviews those workplace practices that encourage the development of agentic subject positions. By this I mean I focus on how people develop OHS subjectivities constituted by attitudes, words and actions that demonstrate a commitment to prioritising the improvement of health, safety and welfare of workers.

I am looking to see if I can find some core principles that might apply across workplaces and some examples that demonstrate their use and effectiveness in practice. However, in searching for these principles I am careful not to make unjustified generalisations because each workplace is unique, each has its own set of influences, its own cultures. Billy cautions me about trying to generalise about all workers in the construction industry and stresses that when considering people's views on safety, *'it's totally like case by case'*.

Generalisations can easily support the either/or distinctions highlighted by binary thinking that privileges one side of the binary to the detriment of the other. Using a poststructural framework allows me to perceive more mobile and fresh ways of speaking about the issues; it allows me to see potential and possibility within the tensions and depths created in between binaries: as forces rub against each other they create sparks of hope and the possibility for innovative solutions.

## **Workplace Structures**

In this section I present evidence that suggests that agentic OHS subject positions may have a better chance of development in workplaces that incorporate OHS thinking into all work activities. The previous discussions have indicated that OHS is much more than knowing and following the rules. People performing work activities must make ongoing decisions based on judgements that are informed by many factors. These factors are often demands that compete for attention; some are perceived as diametrically opposed, others are more oblique and are perhaps more easily reconciled. Many of the demands are

not specifically within OHS discourse, such as the desire to not be perceived as a trouble maker, while some, such as who defines what is a hazard or risk, are clearly positioned within OHS. This suggests that OHS management cannot easily be separated from other concerns of management such as quality, production, environment, and employee relations. For example, Zella works at a child care centre that values OHS and values the opinions of staff. I asked her what she attributed their successful style to:

*It's for complex reasons, it's not just OHS. It is such a complex thing you can't just say one thing makes OHS good, because that wouldn't work, it wouldn't work to have an OHS rep in somewhere that didn't already have that supportive culture.*

She clearly understands that successful OHS can only be achieved when OHS is integrated into the way the workplace is managed. Luke agrees:

*I think that what we need to do is just do away with occupational health and safety, and part of doing the job correctly is to do the job safely. So we don't talk about doing the job safely, you just do the job, but you do it properly.*

In the above quote Luke believes that making OHS a separate item to be managed contributes to the possibility of it being marginalised by being placed as one part of the oppositional binary pair of costs/safety. OHS becomes the subordinate of the two, it becomes the annoying voice that takes away our focus on what is the real core – the business of making profits.

Pat finds that OHS has to be integrated into all the activities of her workplace because the reality is that the only way to successfully perform their job is to do it safely. She describes the ways in which workers talk to her about their work and their safety while performing their work. Their work and their safety cannot be separated:

*It's constant, those sort of discussions happen at all levels. I might be there when they come back from outreach or something and they might just debrief with me and talk about what has happened.*

Workers may feel some sense of empowerment or ownership of the decisions if their ideas make a real contribution during the decision making process. Rose contemplates this issue when we are talking about what can be done to improve workers' engagement with OHS:

*How could we improve it? I think the only way I can see any difference in what we do at the moment would be to get more staff involvement in actual awareness and actually sharing, talking to each other, and making suggestions. If they participate at this level it might increase ownership or something. Maybe they'll be more aware if they feel like they've got the power to change things, I don't know.*

Rose describes the new process for consultation that they are trialling at her workplace as a 'structure' of the management system; that is, it will become part of the way work is performed rather than an added on OHS component. Paul also speaks of the importance of integrating OHS into the systematic way of performing ones' work. Paul argues that one of the reasons OHS is considerably marginalised in his organisation is that *we don't have those structures*. For example, staff at his workplace

*Don't have to report OHS in our reporting system. So if the funding body doesn't want it, that's your guide... so, and I am probably stressing it a lot, there's no structure that makes us do it.*

He claims because of this lack of structure addressing OHS, it is not really thought of as part of the way one does one's work. OHS is just a tool you use when you can get something you want from it; it is an add-on, an optional extra to gain leverage for a specific purpose to further ones' own advantage. For OHS subjectivities to develop strength they need to be encouraged through a system that demonstrates their importance by integrating OHS at the molecular level and making it intrinsic to all workplace activities.

## **Care, trust and relationships**

So far in this thesis I have theorised that the development of OHS subjectivity requires that people adopt an agentic OHS subject position in which they, as speaking and acting subjects, are willing to challenge the status quo by contesting the hegemony that locates OHS as subservient to the needs of production. They seek to rebalance the conceptual and conflictual dyad between costs and safety by slipping and sliding in the spaces between and drawing attention to the less powerful member and convert the binary into a cycle in which both cost and safety feed and reinforce each other. This requires them to be thinking subjects who proactively seek out means to improve health and safety; the implication is that they drive safety initiatives rather than reluctantly

and/or passively follow them or even resist them. Ontologically this is not easy as it challenges the normalisation and reification of management prerogative, and epistemologically it is fraught with difficulty because it seeks to redefine who has the right to articulate knowledge and what/whose knowledge is considered valid and useful.

This part of the chapter introduces and explores, using the words of the participants, how proactive and agentic OHS subject positions are encouraged by leaders who build relationships grounded in empathic care and mutual trust, and share some of their decision making authority with staff.

It is not easy for management to relinquish their control to their employees because they bear the responsibility for all and any outcomes. Managers themselves need to find a balance between control and freedom if they are to foster a bottom-up approach that does share power with the employees. This can be achieved by management showing that they value staff and by allowing workers to make many of their own decisions and be responsible for them. For example, Pat leads by example as she encourages her staff to share responsibility for their work environment:

*Because of the stress of the work I feel that a lot of my role is just trying to keep morale going; so I like staff to come in to a centre that looks a bit more attractive. I put flowers on the table and sometimes I'll cook cakes and take them in just so people feel like they are a bit valued, because it's stressful and demanding work. People respond by bringing things in themselves; we don't have much money and it's not a particularly attractive environment. They all have to take responsibility for that, not just me. They see things and they go oh we can do this, or you know we could put this up.*

Here Pat consciously creates a work environment in which workers feel they are cared for and trusted; they respond by caring for each other and being trustworthy. Pat encourages the generation of alternate OHS storylines that encourage workers to feel powerful in determining their present and future. She achieves this by allowing them to make many of the decisions that affect themselves. This encourages them to adopt an agentic OHS subject position, and, as she says '*think about it*'.

In terms of their own safety, Pat encourages them to be proactive and speak up:

*And I encourage staff to use their time in lieu so that they don't get too stressed. With their own safety they need to be able to say things that are affecting them, that might impact on their work, or they're not sleeping as well at home, or their hassled in their work sometimes, so they need to be able to work that out, and feel safe and comfortable about that.*

She believes that the staff do speak up, are proactive, preemptive and take the initiative in managing their own safety because they feel trusted and respected and are encouraged to articulate OHS storylines that well from participation, cooperation and caring, rather than compliance and conflict. She creates an environment in which agentic action is encouraged, is a right, and is a responsibility, rather than it being a battle.

Pat and her staff work in the field of community services which has one of the highest rates of stress related workers compensation claims (Wadick, 2008:354). Pat, as a senior manager, has a duty of care to manage the psychological hazards that can cause stress related injuries. She refrains from autocratically making blanket rules across the organisation that may do little more than help protect her from liability. Instead she engages the staff in determining how they would like to manage such situations as those presented when volatile clients turn up at the workplace, and who could cause them either physical or emotional harm. She manages different buildings in different situations and allows workers to choose different and local safety strategies. For example, duress alarms are often used by workers in her industry to alert either other workers or police/security as to the presence of a violent and/or threatening person or persons. Pat allowed the different workers to design their own strategies that they felt were appropriate for them:

*One of our programs is based in a housing estate, but staff didn't want to be in the building by themselves, which was fair enough. Because they were frightened, they knew it was bad, bashings and that. And they'd seen the drug bus there, and there were a couple of particular residents who would come in and make a big noise. They didn't feel they could stand their ground, so they wanted the alarm. So we actually have a duress alarm for that building. And they will literally close the doors if there are not 2 of them in the building. They will not open the door. And I've approved all that because they are there by themselves, that's up to them. Then you come to our centre where we've got a receptionist, everyone has to come in through the front door, report to her. We looked at a duress alarm for there but the decision has been not to do it. Because it's everybody's responsibility. And we've made that decision time and time again, as staff,*

*we've thought about it and talked about it. We talked about doing it...the receptionists themselves feel that they can deal with it... and that's something we balance all the time. Because we want people to feel in control of their environment, but it is an interesting balance.*

Pat's analysis of achieving the 'interesting balance' in which people feel 'in control of their environment' goes to the heart of how to encourage agency – not just OHS agency, but agency at work. According to Pat's story, people who feel efficacious in controlling their workplace environment may be more likely to constitute themselves as proactive, agentic OHS subjects. However, allowing her staff to take responsibility for the decisions they make by negotiating with and listening to them is not unproblematic for Pat because she is accountable to her more senior management who would have her insist on more control:

*I've had staff who've gone off to workshops and come back and said they'd have us only working in pairs, everyone is out to get us ha ha. I might have a visit from my manager and I say that's not how I work. But they also know that if they need to do a home visit and they're not comfortable, then I mean, then they can take someone, or they can move them into the centre as well.*

Pat resists the pressure to enforce systems that are not supported by her staff and encourages them to determine how best to manage each situation. She engages them throughout the entire risk assessment process:

*I mean that everyone has to be involved in the planning of it.*

Pat seems successful at engaging the workers to proactively manage their own health and safety:

*I actually wasn't there this time when they did it. They take over, we'll unload this and we'll pack it this way.*

She can trust that they will make effective workplace decisions even when she is not there. To what can we attribute this success? It seems that her management style is rooted in building relationships with her staff and this engenders layers of trust. Staff learn to trust her because she demonstrates by her actions that she cares about them and for them:

*When we get this call that says come and unload the truck, and I know there is a couple of staff who shouldn't be carrying anything and we've said always and I say it very publicly and we all do, look you go on switch [operate the switchboard], you know, so and so can come and help because you shouldn't be lifting, because otherwise we're all scurrying in and out and if somebody's sitting there not doing anything...*



She is very conscious about how her actions are symbolically interpreted by her staff and ensures that all are able to contribute in their own personally relevant way. Once again Pat stresses the importance of meaningful attention to what her staff are saying. A critical strategy she employs is

*Responding to them when things come up...you have to listen and you have to pull out what's important and be seen to do something.*

Workers know they are cared about and trusted when they are listened to and their concerns are taken seriously enough to influence decision making.

Pat's approach can be understood using the lens of governmentality. Pat, as a senior manager, is legally accountable and liable for the actions of her staff; government regulation requires her to ensure a safe workplace, which extends to managing the conduct of her staff. The employment relationship at Pat's workplace provides a space (Townley, 1998:194), or a potential, for her to organise her managerial prerogative. She adopts a human relations management (HRM) strategy that does not merely dominate her staff or crush their capacity for action (Findley & Newton, 1998:222). Rather, Pat recognises that people in liberal societies are agentic subjects who desire freedom, and she enacts a technology that steers and fosters their agency (Rose, 1999). HRM corresponds to a move away from a regulatory and compliance model of employee management towards a commitment based model that aims to have employees actively identify with the objectives of the organisation (Findley & Newton, 1998:222). It is an attempt to transform work itself by placing the worker in a position where she can arrive by herself at the satisfaction of her basic needs (Donzelot, 1991:269). Pat's use of HRM allows her to discipline the interior of the organisation and organise labour into a productive force by bridging the gap between power and labour (Townley, 1998:195). She translates the wishes of the government and helps her employees forge alignments between the objectives of the government, the objectives of her organisation, and their own personal objectives (Rose, 1999:48). She thereby fosters the self organising capacities of her employees (Rose, 1999:49) and encourages them to actively participate in creating a safe workplace. They happily learn to employ their own technologies of subjectivity (Miller & Rose, 2008:7) to manufacture their own personal happiness and fulfillment within the space defined by and

confined to the labour relations at their workplace. Hence, OHS discourse is one axis of many that construct subjectivity and can become a resource for people to use in constructing their own life project (Rose, 2007:129).

Natalie negotiates with her library staff in developing safe work practices. She manages from a distance because she has several branches spread over a wide geographic area, and identifies this as a potential barrier to ensuring they use the new trolleys to carry books in:

*The issue for me is, now I've got to get them to work with them all the time; it's very hard to do that policing, or supervision from a distance. I think it works because as long as you explain why, and try and show them the benefits, and I guess negotiate with them by saying look, ok you can relax some other things so long as you comply with this and do it this way, I won't worry if you don't have all books on the shelf by the end of the day, because it's going to take you a little bit longer. And then they're more willing to identify things themselves; if they know that you're pro helping them or trying to overcome some of these problems, then they're more willing to point out, well what do you think about this? Otherwise they tend to go 'what's the point? What's the point of me saying look I think that's wrong?'*

Here Natalie feels as though she can trust her staff because she has developed a good relationship with them. She has listened to their concerns and the team has agreed on a way forward in which they all feel their needs can be met. Their OHS subjectivity is discursively constituted through meaningful consultation. It seems as though managers become effective health and safety leaders when they consciously prioritise the building of trusting relationships with their staff. For Natalie to be successful in negotiating her dual position as manager and rep and consequent multiple positionings, she must take an ethical approach by representing her constituents equally and fairly and exercising her power with beneficence. In doing so she engenders trust, which is shown to lubricate agency and foster an enthusiastic and optimistic subjectivity. OHS cannot escape the influence of power, but when power is used benignly, with integrity and in positive ways, it allows people to take a chance and suggest.

Natalie and Pat have worked out ways to manage their staff from a distance by encouraging them to align their own goals with those of the organisation. They both achieve this by listening to their workers, negotiating and collaborating with them on how to meet their organisational and personal needs, and including

them in decision making processes. They help establish a climate of justice and fair play by respecting and trusting the staff, within the possibilities offered by the employment contract.

The work of discursive production that Natalie and Pat and their staff do in negotiating and constituting the meaning of OHS is constant and continuous; it is not a simple linear model with start and finish lines. Natalie is aware of this in the way she manages the reporting of incidents:

*Well I know that this particular staff member he'll get a real kick when I go over and say now Frank, I've got the incident report can you please show me what happened... he is one of those people who is pretty alert at identifying problems. So I always try to act on whatever he identifies, because you want that sort of person.*

Natalie knows that she needs to pay attention to the little things people report if she wants to gain their trust and conversely, to be able to trust them. If she wants them to be engaged, she must engage them where they are at now, in each now, and in each particular occasion. Whenever she enacts this performativity she brings into being what her actions name (Blumenfeld, et al., 2005:11), which is care and trust among her staff. She achieves this not only through her interpersonal skills but also by kindling the individual actor's desires.

Rose corroborates the importance of showing that you care for your staff by listening to them. She contrasts this style with an autocratic approach to OHS management; here she talks about Kevin's style – Kevin has some responsibilities for OHS as an OHS representative at her workplace and compares the effectiveness of his domineering style to a caring approach:

*Kevin can be a bit bossy sometimes. He's got a different way, he's a lecturer, didactic, finger wagging. But it doesn't even work well with kids anymore. No, generally we use a sharing style and it's specific. People say, oh, there's a bit of carpet up over at so and so's place and I put it in the book, so it's a bit of sharing looking after each other I guess.*

Rose's use of the term 'specific' underlines the performative nature of OHS leadership in that each occasion offers an opportunity to undo or reinforce previous work; outcomes are not fixed, immanent or guaranteed. Repeating actions of care and trust at each opportunity reinforce their legitimacy and models a sort of repeating that encourages agency.

Zella describes how a friendly approach by the OHS rep makes staff at her workplace more inclined to embrace OHS initiatives:

*But I think as well because it's a staff member who's our friend and she's really nice and it's coming from her. You sort of want to do it more than it just being like the boss or the committee telling you stuff. You feel like you want to...yeah, she's like just friendly about it so it's more like a team thing when something does come up. Everywhere that I've worked has had the posters for back care, or things like that, but generally that's as far as it goes, just having posters up and around and stuff and you're just expected to follow that yourself, but no one ever does...*

Once again it is the quality of the relationships between people that predicts the take up of OHS and not the quality of the paperwork, the rules or the system. I discuss this more fully in the following chapter.

Luke approaches this same outcome from a slightly different angle, using a different language as he speaks of the fundamental importance of communication and leadership skills:

*I think what is important is we really do need those communication and leadership skills, and empathy and if we listen and talk to them maybe we'll learn something. And if they become involved and listened to, that's where we are going to get the cooperation.*

He reiterates the importance of being interested in what employees have to say:

*And we might go and talk to that person about that, using the skills of empathy.*

The word 'empathy' is defined by the Macquarie Dictionary as 'mental entering into the feeling or spirit of a person, appreciative perception or understanding' (Macquarie University, 2001:618). Luke, like Pat, Natalie and Rose believes that a leadership style that incorporates empathic relationship building based on mutual care, trust and responsibility will have positive effect on health and safety outcomes by engaging the hearts and minds of the workers. They are more likely to exercise their OHS agency because they know it achieves results. OHS agency seems to be at least as much, if not more, about the interpersonal relationships as it is about the auditable framework. Most of the examples provided above that demonstrate people's willingness and ability to adopt agentic subject positions emphasise the interpersonal and barely mention codified systems.

Peter, as an OHS trainer in the construction industry, finds that if he focuses on relationships between equal and consenting partners he is more likely to engage his course participants firstly with his class content and secondly with their own vision of what they will do back at work. He invites them to participate:

*And I always try and start humble. I say, my job here is not to train you or pass or fail you, my job is to make you aware of issues, you talk to me, I'll talk to you, and we'll come to some compromise with how we're gonna deal with this. I'll learn from you, and you'll learn from me; everyone will be happy*

He tells stories with humour to help them realise their mortality, the limitations of their physical body. He also appeals to their understanding of the two strands of OHS management and knows they need to emotionally engage with the course content if he is to make a difference:

*And then make 'em cry sometimes. You got kids, so who do you want your kid to work for? Someone who's got a big thick safety management plan and makes 'em sign it, or someone who's gonna look after his welfare? Eh, which one? You know, treat him like a human being, you've brought him up to 20 in one piece. And then you're gonna go and give him to some pisshead cowboy, who's gonna put him 12 metres off the ground, with no....And I said, are you happy with that? 'Cause I'm not. And they go, yeah (with feeling), and then they get emotional, and I'll play on that emotion. Well, up to a point.*

He tries to inspire them by painting the intuitive picture of a workplace that cares for workers as being more likely to be a safer workplace than one that does not care.

However, caring for staff is not the only factor in people learning to enact an agentic OHS subject position, and caring does not guarantee a safer workplace, as Billy's experience in the construction industry suggests. He has noticed that caring for your staff is more likely in smaller organisations rather than in the larger ones. When I asked him why the companies that he has worked for look after his safety he replied

*The major companies, it's because they don't want to be liable, but for the smaller companies I think it's because they have a personal relationship with you, even though they are pretty dodgy, but more of their safety stuff is about taking care of you.*

Even this is not straightforward as he admits that despite this caring attitude many of the smaller companies are *pretty dodgy* when it comes to safety. A

caring work climate can lubricate the development of OHS subjectivity but it doesn't guarantee it; there are other conditions that also need to be met. For example, Rose combines her caring attitude and her eagerness to listen to her staff with other visible structures:

*For the most part I think we do a pretty good job. They get their manual handling, we train them, anything that's coming around, we try. Every meeting has an OHS component where we talk about it. It's on all of our agendas so we talk about any issues.*

The caring for staff must be in combination with a visible and active commitment to worker health, safety and welfare. I underline the significance of 'visible and active' commitment as opposed to ostensible or alleged commitment such as appears in vision statements, policy documents, paper trails and the gathering of statistics. These activities in themselves are not corrupt, tainted or hollow, but if they are in isolation they tend to give safety a bad name by privileging paperwork and liability over health and safety. They can become reified into the main game rather than the creation of a healthy and safe workplace. A key element of all OHS management systems is called "management commitment". Most, if not all, of the examples provided above come from organisations that have OHS management systems that extol the virtues of management commitment and describe OHS responsibilities of their managers. However, these policies and statements of responsibilities rarely, if ever, give examples to show what this means in actual and local practice. I suggest that this research demonstrates that workers perceive true management commitment to OHS when managers show through their actions that they do prioritise worker health and safety, that they do care about workers, above or equal to other core values. Modelling the vision is extremely important because it not only legitimizes it but demonstrates what it looks like in practice. The resultant consistency between a leaders' words and actions builds employee trust in the leader (McShane, et al., 2010:472).

This section of the chapter has demonstrated that workers who feel cared for, respected and trusted in a workplace with structures that prioritise worker health and safety are more likely to engage their desiring selves in proactively and cooperatively creating safer workplaces. OHS subjectivities are influenced by a wide array of organisational practices, not just those specifically dedicated to

OHS management and it is the quality of the relationships between people that predicts the take up of OHS rather than the quality of the paperwork, rules or system. Such workplaces tend to generate alternative storylines that flow from and are nurtured by participation, cooperation and caring, which differ from much of the language of the previous sections that speaks of compliance and conflict.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has used the words of the interview participants to help describe current perceptions of OHS discourse held by workers. It has showed that OHS is a web of contradictions in which it is used for many purposes, only some of which are intended to improve worker health and safety. OHS is very often viewed as restrictions couched in rules that should be followed. The language used by research participants suggests that OHS consists of an assemblage of technologies that encourage self government, as exemplified by the compliance mentality epitomised in the regular use of self-talk such as “should”, “must”, “get caught”, “watching you”, and so on. A managerialist discourse of OHS requires subjects to internalize these rules and then enforce their own actions of compliance.

Costs and production are usually considered as more important than health and safety, and this tension is embedded within the power relations at work. People often remain silent about their concerns because of these power relations, which help perpetuate the things that are the basis of their concerns. Reporting incidents is problematic and subject to many influences, only some of which are directly related to improved worker health and safety. People are loathe to report when they perceive it will result in negative consequences, and more likely to report when they are supported for doing so, although OHS subjectivities are fragile and require regular nurturing.

OHS subjectivity must be negotiated within the tensions created between paperwork and actual practice. Much OHS paperwork is created because of accreditation requirements or as a defence against liability claims, while being careful and using one’s common sense is often thought of by workers as

actually keeping one safe. OHS consultation is contested terrain and heavily influenced by the power relations in operation at the workplace. The act of speaking up conjures feelings of challenging powers that have power over self. The language of much OHS is about compliance, while much of the language of consultation is about conflict.

In this chapter there is a whole spectrum of subjectivities represented, from those who consider OHS does not improve health and safety much at all, to those who extol its virtues. Some workers have developed and continue to nurture strong agentic subject positions whereas others have not; some want to and others do not. One thing is clear, however, and that is whatever the particular workplace situation, OHS subjectivity is constituted within competing pressures – it always stands in relation to something. Workers with agentic OHS subjectivities navigate between competing pressures and turn the perceived competition between costs and safety into a balanced union. They combine the two strands of codified and embodied claims to knowledge that seem to have been placed in binary opposition and allow them to inform each other, to play with each other, to bounce off each other, and even to inspire each other. They reshape compliance and conflict into more useful concepts and develop tools that help them become proactive, agentic, speaking OHS subjects. I sought out these practices so that they could be named, described and understood and thereby shown as examples of how some people in particular workplaces have found this way forward. We may be able to learn things that might point the direction to a safer and healthier future in more of our workplaces.

In the following chapter I present some data in a different form: I present it as a four act play. This style of data presentation helps to show how OHS subjectivities are constructed in real and local workplace contexts that are socially mediated and suffused with competing pressures and tensions. The play demonstrates how the development of OHS subjectivities is ongoing, iterative and heuristic, speaking of desire and affect, rather than linear, purely logical or cognitive.



# Chapter 7. Saying the Unsaid

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## Introduction

The focal point or climax of this chapter is a 4-act play titled *Saying the Unsaid*, but I firstly introduce you to the concepts of performance and performativity, and demonstrate the performance nature of OHS subjectivity. I then discuss performance ethnography as a viable medium for presenting and analysing data as it allows such issues as complexity of interpersonal relationships, affect, symbolism, and power to be presented in a simulated but believable way. It also allows me to more easily demonstrate the embodied, contingent, local and ongoing processes of the development of an agentic subject position that allows for workers to proactively engage in the ongoing negotiations of creating and maintaining healthy and safe workplaces. Although agency may be said to be a property of individuals, it is also embedded in networks of social relations (Hitlin & Elder, 2007:49-50). The performance of a play helps to show how subjectivity, identity and meaning are socially negotiated in communities of people (Weedon, 1997:98), while drama is a very powerful way to show 'cultural construction in action' (Tedlock, 2005:470).

In the second part of the chapter I present the script of the play for you to read and enjoy. I provide no commentary or analysis but allow the dialogue itself to speak to your mind, your heart and your spirit. The play was written, edited and refined over approximately the one year time frame during which I was constructing and analysing data. I began writing the play because I was struggling with how to capture the emotional, embodied, local, and social content of the stories people were telling me in interviews and at courses I facilitated. These stories regularly demonstrated to me that the developing of OHS subjectivities and the constructing of meaningful OHS knowledges and experiences, were ongoing, contingent and heavily negotiated. They spoke of affect, of contested claims to truth, of desire, and of differential opportunities. I trialled performing earlier versions of the play at various conferences and; after each I made changes based on feedback from participants and audiences. What I present in this chapter may still not be its final form because I am now seeking

partners to help me to organise the play to be performed as a proper play with actors, costumes, settings/props and an audience of workers.

## **Performance**

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. OHS 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 OHS management systems, wearing the correct personal protective equipment, and so on. As the cartoon in Chapter 2 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 OHS 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 OHS 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, OHS subjectivities are called into being through the stylized repetition of acts over time. OHS 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 (Atkins, 2005a:255) nature, we may be able to interrupt them (Atkins, 2005a: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 (Atkins, 2005a:255) by 'subverting the resignification of the norm in its repetition' (Atkins, 2005a: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 & 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 OHS 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 OHS trainer, is to identify where the possibilities of agency are for these workers. Peter's story in Chapter 5 provides a clear example of how his subjectivity and consequent silence and self censorship are constructed within the dynamics of the contradictions and tensions of OHS discourse. However, table 4 in Chapter 4, and the interview comments in chapter 6, suggest that quality training may help workers articulate their ideas by arming them with the knowledge, skills, confidence and desire they need to assume their legal right to speak up and be heard.

Performance has had a 'troubled life' (Jackson, 2006:78) in academic circles as the 'textualist paradigm' (Bowman & 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 & Conquergood, 2006:421) is also reified in OHS 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 & Conquergood, 2006:421) that believes representations are 'real truths guarded and championed accordingly' (Hamera & Conquergood, 2006:421). However, in OHS 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 (remember the workers in the safety observations case study in Chapter 5 who were very skeptical of their reporting and paperwork requirements).

I am calling 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 & Yennie-Donmoyer, 2008:213) that give flesh (Jones, 2006:339) to the thick description (Donmoyer & 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 & Darso, 2008:639) of the OHS 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, as in chapter 4, does not really 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 & Peterson, 2006:153). I believe it enhances the authenticity of my data presentation results because it captures the words of participants, 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 OHS discourse. OHS 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).

So, performance ethnography makes many claims extolling its virtues. But, can they be substantiated? Well, I have performed the play four times now, twice at two different safety conferences, once at a university residential school for post graduate students in education, and once at a meeting of about 20 OHS professionals. Audiences have comprised OHS 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 & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995, 2008), 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 & Yennie-Donmoyer, 2008:213). I conscript impromptu volunteer actors from the audience who join me on stage, with no time for rehearsals. There are usually more volunteers than acting roles, which perhaps demonstrates peoples' willingness to engage. 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.

I have received many supportive and/or thoughtful comments from audience members and actor-performers. I now present and discuss some of these impressions and suggestions to lend support to the inclusion of a performance piece in this thesis. I begin with a selection of generally supportive comments provided personally and verbally to me:

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

*‘A reality check’* (an Australian OHS academic and researcher)

*‘We need to integrate role play into our teaching of OHS’* (Senior research scientist from the United States of America).

*‘Exciting’* and *‘really good’* from several audience participants.

Several OHS 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 OHS performance, adding that power has so far been undertheorised as an influence on OHS management.

A tape recorded comment during a discussion after the performance at the university residential exclaimed:

*‘I feel concerned now after watching, if that’s what’s happening at our workplaces’.*

There were also some written comments sent to me by email:

*‘I particularly enjoyed the comment [in the play] that it was all the subby’s fault, probably because it rang true’* (Miriam, university research assistant).

*‘Great ideas and presentation’* (Marc, OHS academic working in Australia).

Some other comments related directly to its pedagogical effectiveness:

*'I think in a training environment this would be well received....very enjoyable'*  
(International OHS 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 OHS practices'* (Matt Gillen, senior OHS research scientist).

Two of the actors commented:

1. *'I thought the short skit was an excellent medium by which to illustrate the importance of "walking the talk" when it comes to safety. The skit showed that safety can be compromised when the commitment to other project objectives takes precedence over safety. This was a refreshing way to drive home an important point. I heard several favorable comments from other attendees about this portion of the presentation'* (Professor Jimmie Hinze), and

2. *'I enjoyed taking part in your performance'* (Dr. Billy Hare).

Another 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 OHS issues'.*

Interestingly, a senior OHS professional, although finding the play interesting, challenged me for presenting perhaps a biased view of OHS, as I did not include how it has improved over the last 10 years or so:

*'I thought the role play was a different way to communicate the issues that we deal with on a daily basis in the construction industry. However you need to be careful that the play is not deemed to portray a biased message, e.g. employers in the construction industry only go through the motions and are not really proactive in addressing safety issues. The safety standards in the industry have certainly improved over the past 10 years as stakeholders now work together to address safety issues. However there will always be a minority that will play the game'* (Paul Breslin, personal communication).

This last comment from Paul has forced me to reflexively search for my biases, and yes, I have found some, and they are related to my personal ontology and

epistemology that want to identify with the marginalised and make the world a fairer, more just and more equal place, especially for the less fortunate, those whose voice is rarely heard in official circles. Hence, my bias certainly leaned to heavily providing the marginalised with a voice, and barely touched on creating a better future for all. This has forced me to review what stories I choose, what I notice, and to include more of what is done well. To achieve this I have written a fourth act and called it 'Politics of Hope', and this is also included in this chapter.



Saying the Unsaid: a four act play

# ‘SAYING THE UNSAID’

A four act play by

Phil Wadick

Act 1. *Training introductions*

Act 2. *Risk management*

Act 3. *Back at the Ranch*

Act 4. *A politics of hope: Safety Leadership*

## Act 1. Training introductions

### Actors:

**T:** Trainer

**P:** Participant: P1, P2 and P3.

### Setting:

*Act 1 is situated in a training room; tables and chairs are set up in U-shape; participants are sitting uneasily waiting for the trainer to begin the course. Trainer fiddles around with paper work, avoiding eye contact with students. Create an air of nervous tension.*

**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.

**T:** Before we start, I want each person to give one example of how OHS has helped at your workplace. Would you mind going first?

**P1:** okay

**T:** thanks

**P1:** It's helped management put liability onto us workers by getting us to sign everything. If something goes wrong, it's our fault because we said we knew what to do and how to do it, even though they never really showed us properly or give us the time.

**T:** Would you like to go next?

**P2:** Sure. Committee meetings give me a break from my work, but they mean I have to work harder when I get back; they haven't reduced my workload so I can go to meetings, do the inspections, write reports, carry out risk assessments, and talk to my team mates.

**P3:** Actually, I'm glad that I don't have to lift those heavy loads anymore. My back's already buggered from years ago, although I don't tell them, because as soon as you know it, I'll be on light duties, and then I'll be out: I'll do myself out of a job. Where else am I going to find a job around here at my age, and with a workers' comp claim? No way I'm going to say anything.

**T:** Thanks everyone. Now we'll answer the question of why people do unsafe things at your workplace, even though we all know that they don't want to get hurt

**P1:** They take shortcuts to get the job done quicker. It saves time and money, and it's easier. Besides, we've always done it that way.

**P2:** Some people at my workplace are not sure how else to do the job. They were shown this way, and now it's a habit. There's so much to do, it's hard to get proper training; and the supervision, well, just the other day our supervisor walked past someone doing the wrong thing, and said nothing.

**P3:** We're often short staffed, but we've still got to meet the targets – see those graphs on the wall, those kpi's: if we don't meet those, there's all hell to pay. Safety before profits, what a joke. Really, it's when it suits them, otherwise, it's profits first

**T:** Well then, what can be done about it? What can you do? What can the organization do?

**P1:** give us more time, better equipment, more staff, more training

**P2:** get the managers and supervisors along to OHS training so they can learn what their responsibilities are. Let them see how much their fines are.

**P3:** well, I suppose people could warm up and do some exercises before they start work, you know, like footballers do, or like they do in China.

**P1:** Yeah, I'd like to see everyone at our place doing Tai Chi on the lawn  
*(laughing and being sarcastic)*

**P1 & P2:** *(in chorus)* Haaaa Haaaa *(laughing)*

**T:** *(looks amused, but unsure of what to do with this nervous energy – T knows that it would be good to do these exercises, but our macho culture makes fun of it. T doesn't join in).*

## **Act 2. Risk management**

Setting and actors: Same as for act 1. Plus, the trainer is trying to present a lesson on the skills of conducting risk assessments

**T:** *(addressing the class, assuming role of knowledgeable person and trainer).*  
Now we are going to learn about risk assessments. Can anyone please give me an example of a hazard from your workplace, tell me what you do now to make it safer for you and your workmates, and suggest a way to fix it so that it is no longer a risk.

**P1:** The noise from the line marking machine – it screams and will make you deaf.

**T:** What can you do, or do you do about it?

**P2:** You could wear ear muffs – they cut out the noise pretty good.

**P1:** Yeah, we're supposed to.

**T:** What do you mean, you're supposed to?

**P1:** Well, the swms tells us to wear them all the time, and we've all signed the swms to say we will do it and understand it.

**T:** Wear them all the time, you mean? Eight hours a day?

**P1:** Like I said, we're supposed to, but they are so hot and uncomfortable, and when they bang into things...., well, they're annoying. Also, you just can't wear 'em all the time: we can't hear each other talking with the ear muffs on and the motor screaming. So, we often take 'em off, especially so we can hear each other shouting.

**P2:** Won't that wreck your hearing?

**P1:** Probably, but we won't get any compo 'cause we signed the swms

**T:** What about those electronic ones that can tune out noise and tune in the human voice, have you tried them?

**P1:** *(emphatically).* There's no way they'll pay for them!

**P2:** Aren't ear muffs from the bottom of the control hierarchy? Shouldn't we get rid of the noise somehow?

**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.

### **Act 3. Back at the ranch, or, what it's like back at work for the new committee**

#### **Scene 1. The importance of small things**

Actors: *Rob, an employee rep, from the outdoor workers; Chris, the chairperson; Kerry, the management representative*

Setting: *The new OHS committee, fresh out of training, turning up for their first meeting since they have been trained, full of enthusiasm. They have already attended one meeting before they went to training. Room is set up as a meeting room, with a large table in centre and chairs around.*

Props: *One high vis vest for Rob, jug of water and glasses on meeting room table.*

**Rob:** Hi Chris, I'm looking forward to this, I've got an item on the agenda that my team wants me to bring up. *(Looks around the room)* I'm starving. What have you got organized for smoko today? It was a great feed last time.....mmmm....I love being on this committee.

**Chris:** Hi Rob *(looking a bit embarrassed)*. Well, um, ....

**Kerry:** *(sounding officious)*. Hi Rob. Didn't anyone tell you – we've *(royal plural)* decided that it costs too much to provide food at the OHS committee meetings, we're on a tight budget, you know. But we do have cold water today.

**Rob:** *(looks astounded and disgusted)*. Oh, I see. Well, er, thanks Kerry; yeah, it is hot outside – that water will be great.

*And later, during a break, Chris and Rob get together: (Although in this production it will be performed immediately as an aside).*

**Rob:** What's all this, Chris? It'd only cost \$20 or so. How broke are we?

**Chris:** Sorry Rob, what can I do? The committee doesn't have its own budget.

**Rob:** Well, I'll tell you what, I'll buy a cake out of my own pocket next time. That'll show 'em

**Chris:** *(thinking)*. How can they expect us to care when they don't care about us?

**Act 3, Scene 2. New committee doing a site safety inspection on a construction site.**

Actors: Rob, Chris and Kerry, all employee reps. Casey is the supervisor.

Setting: Rob, Chris and Kerry all have a clipboard and pen each, and appear to be walking around looking, inspecting, trying to be positive, because this is their first inspection, and they want to be thorough, like the trainer encouraged them.

Props: 3 clipboards, 3 pens, 3 high vis vests and 4 hard hats.

**Rob:** This site is pretty good, pretty tidy, eh. Much better than some I've worked on.

**Chris:** Yeah mate, except for you formworkers leaving all ya' board everywhere *(joking and laughing, elbowing Rob in the ribs)*

**Rob:** I'll get you back, Chris. I'll find something your team mucked up

**Kerry:** Wait a minute you guys – look at all those leads on the ground. Bloody subbies, I bet. Where's their safety switches? Look at that, will ya, leads in the puddle! *(looking very concerned)*.

**Chris:** We'll have to score that as a non compliance.

**Rob:** *(Looking around, showing with his mouth how he can taste it)*. Can you taste that dust – it's blowing everywhere. Let's mark it down as another non compliance.

**Kerry:** What have we got here *(checking his checklist, doing some calculations, mumbling to himself)*? I reckon about 68% compliance. Pretty good, that sounds like a pass. The boss'll be happy we got so much to report *(seriously thinks that reporting is encouraged)*.

**Chris:** Hey boss *(boasting about all their good work)*, we got 68%.

**Casey:** *(horrified and almost beside himself)*. What??? You gotta be kidding. My KPI's mean we gotta get at least 85. Give me a look at that, I'll fix it.

*(Dismay and astonishment on the faces of the 3 new committee members)*.



## **Act 4. A Politics of Hope: Safety leadership**

### **Scene 1. In the Library**

*Actors: Rob (chief librarian), Chris, Kerry, Partner 1 and Partner 2.*

*Rob comes into the library and Chris and Kerry are already there, busy working.*

**Rob:** Morning Chris, morning Kerry.

**Chris, Kerry:** Oh, hi Rob. Lovely day

**Rob:** ....oh, for ducks, if you like rain.

**Chris:** yeah, well, it's good for my garden.

**Rob:** Oh, Kerry, how's the missus and the kids?

**Kerry:** Oh, gee, they're a bit...the kids are fine, but Ruby, she's been a bit crook lately, which is a shame because it means the lawn's getting about 2 foot long and I might have to do it.

**Rob:** Oh, Noooooo *(said almost sarcastically but with humour)*. Oh well, give her my love will you, I hope she gets better. So, what have we got on today?

**Chris:** Oh, same old, same old. Got quite a few books to put back in the shelves, from the returns and the....we've got some new ones to unload, those boxes we ordered came.

**Rob:** Oh, good. Listen, you know how a few months ago, you said that you had a sore back and arm from, well you thought maybe from doing the books and the shelving, Chris. And Kerry, I don't know if it affects you so much, but we did have one of our male staff a couple of years ago who had about a month off with a, well RSI in his elbow and shoulder, and then he had to come back on light duties for a while. Anyway, so, I don't know if you've ever seen at other libraries, but they have these little trolleys that the library staff use to put books away. So, I've got one on trial for us to try. What do you think about that?

**Chris:** Oh, let's have a look. *(said with some excitement in the voice, although a bit concerned about any change and what it might mean)*.

*Rob goes out and brings it in.*

**Kerry:** Oh, okay, yeah I think I've seen one somewhere. So where do you put the books...? oh, I see the books go on here, yeah, yeah *(as he looks over the trolley, checking it out)*. Gee, you wouldn't fit many books on really, would you, no more than you'd carry in your arm.

**Rob:** No, that's right, about probably 10 or 12 books you'd fit on here.

**Chris:** Yeah, well I can easily carry, well, mmmm, yeah, I don't know (*looking over it too, imagining using it*). It might be alright.

**Rob:** Look, would you be willing to try it. I've got it on loan for a trial, so let's have a go and see what it's like, would you. It'd help save you carrying all those books.

**Kerry:** (*arching and stretching the back muscles*). Ooohhh, yeah, well, it could be a good idea. Alright, I'll give it a go.

**Chris:** Well, I'm doing shelving this morning, Rob, so what if I trial it this morning.

**Rob:** Okay, oh good on you Chris, thanks very much for that. I'll see you later, I've gotta go over to one of the other branches (*Rob leaves the library*).

**Chris and Kerry:** Okay, see you.

*Chris has a bit of a look at the trolley and says,*

**Chris:** oh well, we'll give it a go. I'm not sure how this will work, but...

*Chris takes it over to where the books are and starts putting some on, standing back a bit and has a good look at it, and says to self:*

**Chris:** Oh, gee, I can only fit about 10 on here, properly; oh well, let's see, we'll give it a go. I like Rob, so I'll try this for her because she thinks it will be better for us.

*Chris starts pushing the trolley out to the shelves, taking it slowly because it is the first time Chris has used it.*

**Chris:** ...mmm, a bit slow, oh, I forgot a couple of the books for the History section,

*Chris starts to turn the trolley around, finds it slow and says*

**Chris:** oh gee, hey Kerry, this is...it's not bad because you don't have to carry 'em, but gee, it's slower; you know, you can't get as many on the shelves and I'm a bit worried I'm gonna get behind.

*A couple of customers come in, what looks to be an elderly couple.*

**Chris:** Good morning, can I help you?

**Partner 1:** Yes, thanks. We've just joined recently and we're wondering how many books we're allowed to get out.

**Chris:** Have you both got a card?

**Partner 2:** Yep, we read a lot now since our kids have left home.

**Chris:** Well, really you can take about 8 each out.

**Partner 1:** Oh, so that's 16. Mmmmm. I'm not sure how we'll be able to carry them around.

**Chris:** Look, why don't you use this trolley; it's a great little trolley for running around with and getting your books. Okay? And besides, I've got a fair bit of shelving to do and I can do it much quicker not using the trolley.

**Partner 1:** Oh well, thanks. Are you sure now?

**Chris:** Yep, yep, no you go for it.

**Partner 2:** Alright

*So they use it; Chris continues shelving, going back, getting armfuls of books, and then when the elderly people finish with it, they just park it near the return area, and Chris leaves it there. Rob comes back that afternoon and sees Chris and Kerry:*

**Rob:** Hi Chris, hi Kerry.

*Chris is carrying some books.*

**Rob:** Oh, Chris, how'd you go with the trolley?

**Chris:** oh, the trolley, yeah, well I forgot about the trolley. Actually I used it this morning for a while, and yeah, it was pretty good. It meant that I couldn't get...it wasn't as quick as when I do it myself, but it definitely did help me not have to carry all those books around all the time. But sometimes I found that it got in the way a bit, or it was slow around the corners, or you couldn't move as quickly coming back to get more books, and in the end I, ah, I gave it to some of our patrons to use, who had to get a lot of books and they found it terrific. So, I think it's really good for the people who want to get a lot of books, great for them to use.

**Rob:** Oh, ok. So you say it's good for not having to carry them in your arms?

**Chris:** Yeah, yeah, it's really good for that, so I don't have to carry them.

**Rob:** But it's slower?

**Chris:** Yeah, and I reckon that if we used it 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

## **Act 4 Scene 2: Manufacturing Lock out – tag out Behavioural Observations Program.**

*This scene is set within the safety observations program at a manufacturing plant.*

*Actors: ROB - Maintenance fitter, fixing a machine; CHRIS - one of his workmates who is doing the observations on him, TERRY - safety coordinator of the place, CASEY - plant manager.*

**Chris:** good day Rob, would you mind if I do one of these safety observations on you while you do the maintenance on the machine or while you fix that blockage?

**Rob:** No, Chris, I don't mind at all.

*So Rob pulls off an air hose to isolate the air pressure that drives the machine. Then he kinks it, ties it back and puts the lock out tag on it.*

**Chris:** Oh, Rob, I was just wondering, you know, is that how you normally lock out this machine?

**Rob:** Yeah, we all do it like this, especially when it's just the blockage up this end.

**Chris:** Is that the way you are supposed to lock out this machine?

**Rob:** No, no; right down the other end in the control room next door, there's a locking mechanism that you can...it's got a castell key and everything; you're supposed to use that one, it locks the whole machine out, but I really only need this end part here locked out. They can keep using the other part of the machine, it doesn't interfere with this end here. And we're a bit behind in production so they want to keep going.

**Chris:** Okay, so, you don't follow the procedure because you've decided it's not really suitable for this job?

**Rob:** yep, that's about it

*Chris is seen to be writing something down on the safety observations record card*

**Chris:** Have you got any suggestions on what we could do?

**Rob:** Well, yeah, my suggestion is that we put on a lock out valve on this section here.

**Chris:** ok, do you mind if I write that down?

**Rob:** No, go for it. I doubt whether you'll get anything done because we've been suggesting that for years; we've given up now.

*Chris writes down Rob's suggestion*

**Chris:** Alright, thanks very much Rob, and good luck with that. I'm going now to put this into the safety officer *(holds up the completed card)*

**Rob:** Okay mate

*So Chris goes over to the safety officer*

**Chris:** Hi Kerry. I've just done a safety observation; this is my one for this month. Here you go

*Chris hands it over, and Kerry looks at it*

**Kerry:** Oh, this is an interesting one. I see that you've noted some unsafe behaviours of Rob. Rob's not using the proper lock out system. You know, that's a sackable offence. I suppose Rob realises that.

**Chris:** Yeah, I think so. Rob says they all do it like that.

**Kerry:** Oh, really.

**Chris:** Yeah

**Kerry:** I better go and talk to the plant manager about this.

*So they go and see Casey.*

**Kerry:** Casey, listen, I've got a problem here. Chris just did a safety observation on Rob doing the maintenance, and Rob's not following lock out tag out procedures properly, you know, that's a really bad offence. Should we sack Rob to make an example, or what?

**Casey:** Oh, Kerry, let's go and have a talk with Rob, let's not take that radical approach straight up, let's go and have a talk with them.

*So Kerry and Casey go and talk with Rob.*

**Casey:** Hey, Rob. How are you going with this machine?

**Rob:** Just about done now thanks. Yeah, gets blocked reasonably regularly, and I've gotta come and adjust the tension on this spring mechanism.

**Casey:** Yeah, okay. Rob, we're just coming here because of the safety observation card that Chris did on you before.

**Rob:** Oh, yeah, we talked about that

**Casey:** Yeah. And Chris said that you weren't using the ....it said on the card that you were doing unsafe acts by not using the proper lock out tag out procedure.

**Rob:** yeah (*head down*), yeah I am. Well,...that's right.

**Casey:** you know you are supposed to follow that procedure. We're really strict on lock out tag out here. People have been killed in our industry.

**Rob:** (*said almost apologetically*) yeah I know. Yeah, I know. Yeah, sorry...(now *gaining a bit of confidence*). Look we always do it like that.

**Casey:** What do you mean?

**Rob:** Come and I'll show you.

*They walk over to the machine and Rob shows them, pointing to it.*

**Rob:** I've just gotta decommission this end of the machine, the other end can't influence this part here, they're separate things. And so I just pull off this air hose here, and kink it and lock that out so, you know, while I've got that off the

machine can't accidentally activate, so, it's ahm,...I'm achieving the same thing, I'm locking it out, shutting it off.

**Casey:** yeah, I can see that but you're not really following the procedure...

**Rob:** yeah, but the procedure...(voice trails off into silence)

**Casey:** (said with kindness, helpfulness and understanding in voice) Well, why don't you? Why don't you follow the procedure?

**Rob:** As I told Chris the procedure doesn't really suit this machine. We need a better system. It's the system that's at fault.

**Casey:** Oh yeah, what do you mean by that? What sort of system?

**Rob:** I reckon that we could put a shut off valve on this end of the machine here so that we can do this regular job without having to shut down the whole machine.

**Casey:** a shut off valve with a lock in it?

**Rob:** Yeah

**Casey:** That's a fine idea Rob. I'll action that. So Kerry, thanks for bringing that to my attention. If we don't know what's going on we can't fix it. Thanks Chris and Rob for being honest about this. It's the only way we can make improvements to the place.

END OF PLAY

## **Chapter conclusion**

This chapter focused on presenting data in the form of a stage play. I firstly discussed the concepts of performance and performativity in the context of OHS discourse and located the possibility for agency in the disruption of hegemonic and normative performances. I then justified the use of drama in a thesis as a method of introducing and analysing data by grounding my discussions in performance academic literature. This theorised how the script of a play can help bring to life the embodied and felt experiences of the participants and can thereby deeply touch the audience. I offered real life evidence of the impact of the play on people by including comments from audiences and actors. Finally, a four act play was presented that not only unpacked many of the contestations and tensions experienced within OHS discourse, but also demonstrated how safety leadership has the power to create an environment that encourages people to adopt agentic subject positions and allow their voices to be heard.



# Chapter 8. Subjectivity, Agency and Power: The dance of OHS performance.

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## Introduction

In this thesis I have tried to capture and present a detailed overview of how a wide cross section of people at work perceive OHS, what it means to them, how they engage with it, and the processes that influence how they learned to engage with it. The reason I have described the meanings people ascribe to their engagement with OHS is that I was endeavouring to understand how OHS subjectivities are constructed, how people learn to enact proactive agentic OHS subject positions, and how they become effective OHS consultative subjects. I allowed post structural thinking to inform my research approach because it offered the opportunity to explore OHS through a lens that highlights language and meaning, subjectivity, discourse/truth, and power/knowledge. This thesis has demonstrated that OHS discourse is replete and almost fermenting and fomenting with dilemmas, with no single, generic, or preferred resolutions. My desire has been to map these dilemmas and open them up to scrutiny so as to better inform the discussions that help provide ways forward.

The previous four chapters have explored the influences on the development of OHS subjectivities and demonstrated that they are constituted within competing tensions. Many of the resulting pressures emanate from complex relations of power in which there is conflict over how knowledge is produced, what is considered useful knowledge, and who is authorised to speak and enact their knowledges. There is debate over claims to truth and this is made more complex by the tendency for each truth claim to be verified using the parameters of the discourse that utters the claim.

In this last chapter I revisit my three research questions that aimed to understand OHS subjectivity, OHS agency, and the speaking subject. In these discussions I move between the knowledges constructed in this thesis and

relevant literature. I then more fully engage with the concept of “trust” and how it relates to all three research questions. The high importance placed on trust by the research participants came as a surprise to me, so I attempt to understand its relevance more deeply.

I wrote myself into the early chapters of the thesis to position and name how my researcher lens influences the research. My early adult history made me acutely aware of the inequalities of life and my more recent OHS work alerted me to how these inequities are played out on workers’ bodies. I was upset and enraged at the injustices power seemed to be wreaking on these bodies, on my body. But, as Oleson (2000, in Holman Jones S, 2005:767) advises, ‘Rage is not enough’; Oleson challenges us to use this rage as energy for change. Within this context I embarked on my research process to connect my disquiet with action.

## **OHS Subjectivity**

The first research question was: ‘How do workers learn to enact OHS subjectivities at work?’ When I use the term OHS subjectivity I mean all the perceptions, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, desires, behaviours and actions a person has or does in relation to OHS. Such a subjectivity dynamically and almost seamlessly slides and negotiates its positioning along a disjunctive and metaphorically rhizomatic, circular space and vacillates stutteringly among various positions along depths between being supportive and positive towards OHS and being negative and in reaction to it. Some individuals are engaged with and passionate about OHS, while others are disengaged and alienated, and many people exhibit various increments of both behaviours.

OHS subjectivities are suffused with contradictions and people must move among these contradictions as they struggle to position themselves. They adjust their precarious positionings to meet the contingent requirements of multiple situations. They balance these demands depending on their own personal priorities, which themselves are transacted.

People need to preserve many types of safety, and they prioritise these types according to their own hierarchy of importance. They need emotional safety such as the need to belong, the need to be appreciated for what they have to

offer, the need to be loved, the need to be accepted; they need the safety offered by job security, and they need their bodies to be safe. Often, the safety of their bodies is not the primary motivation for their actions in relation to OHS. Emotional and psychological safety can assume a greater salience in generating a response to the demands of OHS discourse. In a recent course I conducted a class participant was criticized and shouted down by the safety manager for discussing certain unsafe behaviours he and his workmates sometimes do at their factory, with the result that all those in the class self-censored their stories for the remainder of the discussion. Psychological safety could be defined as 'feeling able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career' (Kahn, 1990, in May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004:15). Individuals feel this type of safety when they sense that they will not be punished for creatively expressing themselves at work (May, et al., 2004:15).

It is difficult to use the correct words to describe how OHS subjectivity is a process rather than a fixed location. OHS discourse offers multiple positionings for OHS subjectivities and the tensions between support, resistance, and conflict are continuously (re)negotiated along the many axes that constitute the workplace socio-technical OHS system (Shaw & Blewett, 2000:461). What is clear from the data is that there is no one uniform OHS subjectivity but there are many. And each person can simultaneously inhabit several OHS subjectivities at the one workplace; they move between them and juggle them as they position themselves according to how they perceive the workplace social dynamics. Various subjectivities jostle for ascendancy as people seek to balance everyday pressures. They slip and slide depending on the needs of the moment, filling a perceived function that varies with specific contexts (Abrahamsson, 2006:108). People can and do seamlessly move between contrasting and/or conflictual OHS subject positions as they seek to satisfy their own needs for safety and security. This thesis has demonstrated that a fundamental principle in operation at workplaces is that the process of learning, developing and adopting OHS subjectivities is always in a state of tension, yet seeking equilibrium. However, the achievement of this equilibrium is a mythical holy grail of OHS. It does not exist, it is never complete nor unified (Scheeres & Solomon, 2006:88), it is

always subject to negotiation and depends on point of view. An implication for this in workplaces is that people need continual positive reinforcement for engaging in agentic OHS practices. Workplaces cannot expect events like one-off training sessions or vision statements to successfully hail a subject into a position. To suture a subject to a subject position (Scheeres & Solomon, 2006:89) requires long term commitment to OHS processes and leadership that is highly visible in nurturing OHS activities.

A primary goal of this thesis has been to expose and explore the tensions that are involved in developing OHS subjectivities and the data chapters graphically depict the reflexive and iterative nature of these processes in motion. Butler (2006) has theorised that the development of the gendered identity is cultural, contingent and contested, and is not purely an algorithm of biology. This thesis has similarly demonstrated that OHS subjectivity is 'tenuously constructed in time' (Butler, 2006:61) through repetition of certain behaviours and is not purely a function of a legalistic framework or of a structured paper-based OHS management system. For instance, the not-reporting of incidents has become such an ingrained reflex among many workers in many organisations across a wide variety of industries that it is now involuntary, unconscious, and considered normal by particular workgroups as a result of historically produced circumstances. It has become the performative accomplishment that people believe in and use to guide their OHS involvements.

In this thesis I have tried to identify behaviours that reduce the effectiveness of OHS so as to help provide loci or leverage points for change. Understanding these performances will open them for interruption and intervention and may facilitate the development of social relations that allow OHS subjectivity to be constituted differently. It is not feasible to change these acts by exhortation alone; change agents must address the social conditions that spawn those acts - the acts simply make the unwritten social rules explicit. For example, why would you report when you know that somehow you will be blamed or get into trouble in some way? This could be changed by having a workplace that celebrates error as fundamental to human learning (Foucault, 2003b:15) and prioritises OHS as at least as important as production.

However, changing these norms is complex work because they have been inscribed in/on people's bodies over historical time frames (Davies, 2006:77) and these inscriptions speak of emotions, attitudes, commitments and understandings. Even when people consciously try to undertake this work, any changes accomplished are always vulnerable to reverting back because of the counterforce exercised by the normalizing work of ourselves and others.

The constant discussions that occur between and within people reflects that learning to enact any OHS subjectivity is a social process grounded in embodied activities and is mutually constituted through discursive practices. Borys (2010, personal communication) suggests that these 'social processes in the workplace are more important than the so-called management systems', while Ortner (2006:107) stresses the importance of the 'cultural and social formations that shape, organize and provoke acting subjects'.

According to poststructuralist theory, the self is an ongoing project. In support of such theorizing, the people in my research have been shown to be continuously 'engaged in selving' (Davies, 2006:81), or continuously engaged in developing their OHS subjectivities. Their stories reveal an almost uninterrupted and incessant iterative and heuristically reflexive process that finds and explores gaps and tensions in the discourse through reflection on how they see OHS played out in their workplaces.

## **OHS Agency**

In chapter two I wrote that historically, OHS discourse has contributed to the improvement of health and safety of workers over the last 200 years, at least in Western countries. More recently, according to workers compensation statistics there has been a decrease in the number of serious injuries to Australian workers over the last seven years (ASCC, 2009a:11), although workers compensation data does not give an accurate picture of the full extent of workplace injuries and diseases (Foley, 1996) because 40% of Australia's workforce is employed outside the workers compensation system (Lawson-Smith, 2010:11). Van de Kerckhove (2006:54) suggests that despite the many efforts made in the European countries, the trends do not indicate an

‘unequivocal positive tendency’. Contemporary OHS legislation that imposes duty of care obligations on employers has encouraged the development of a focus on protection from liability and spawned a plethora of documented practices that attempt to demonstrate compliance. These paperwork systems often are perceived as more important to implement than actually safeguarding worker safety. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that there has been much effort by many stakeholders over a long time frame to get OHS issues discussed publicly and written into laws, mission statements, contracts and so on. Now that it is thus enshrined, the possibility has been opened for people to enact their agentic selves, and, using the new tools provided by this new and espoused framework, hold their organisations to their word and effect changes (McKenzie, 2006:42).

This thesis has illustrated how difficult such agency is to perform – opportunities to exert agency do now formally exist but the actual adoption of agentic subject positions is constrained by pressures and tensions, very often constituted in the power relations of the workplace. People can and do refrain from speaking up for a wide variety of reasons, many of which are not related to their health and safety. Despite this, some of the research participants had found ways to develop and enact their agency and I addressed these in Chapter 6 in which I spoke of a kind of ‘utopian performativity’ (Munoz J E, 2006:20) in which I imagined a better future, a possibility offering the potential for change. The way forward will include a celebration of achievements as milestones and then using them to gain leverage for further improvements, thus encouraging further agency.

My second research question was ‘To what extent do workers learn to enact agentic OHS subject positions?’, which speaks to the relationship between agency and subjectivity. The relationship is more complex than the simple linear and functionalist model that suggests that legislating for safe workplaces will unproblematically achieve them; similarly, the scientifically driven technical rational paradigm suggests that newly learned knowledge will easily be implemented (Senge, 1996). This simple and almost intuitive thinking does not do justice to people’s reflexive abilities that monitor the relationship of the self to

the world (Ortner, 2006:126). OHS discourse has opened up possibilities for new subject positions but they are not simply or willingly taken up or spoken into existence. People resist practices that they perceive attempt to disempower them. They have learned to interact with the workplace in certain ways and they may need more than access to a new discursive practice to change these ways (Davies, 2000:65).

For instance, individuals' epistemological beliefs influence their ways of dealing with problems and issues, especially if any new approaches or heuristics are required (Harteis, et al., 2006:123), such as those beckoned by an OHS discourse that invites people to now become speaking and acting OHS subjects. Just because OHS discourse now says you can speak up, the historically produced non-speaking subject is hard to change because not speaking has become integral to one's subjectivity and cannot easily be put on and off like a mask. It has been continuously constructed and negotiated in relation to the experiences, situations and people with whom we interact (Etelapelto & Saarinen, 2006:160). People have invested in their subject positions (Scheeres & Solomon, 2006:89) in an emotionally imbued process of growth (Etelapelto & Saarinen, 2006:160). This positioning is not fixed and can be disrupted, but may require the person to consciously recognise their investment in their position and the kinds of work this identity work does, and to actively (re)negotiate with themselves and others their movement into new positions (Scheeres & Solomon, 2006:89).

Subjects can change in response to events or new information, although purely cognitive knowledge may not be enough to effect this change because people are affective and desiring subjects. Venn (2002:66) elaborates: 'The cognitive cannot by itself motivate the process of redirecting or recathecting affect which is central to the transfiguration of subjects'. Subjectivity and agency are fuelled by desire; the emotions are fundamental to the execution of agency because by enacting an agentic subject position one is breaking the boundaries of what has previously been said and done, and this requires energy and inspiration, which suggests that agency may be at the nexus of knowledge, skills, power and desire. The process of facilitating agency may be achieved by developing

knowledge and skills in people, and kindling their desire and motivation to equip them to use their own power to resist hegemonic and normalizing power by proactively forging new paths, new links.

My research suggests it would seem that if people are motivated or inspired they are more likely to direct their discretionary effort in the direction of that inspiration. This confirms organisational research that theorises individuals who believe a given work role activity is personally meaningful are likely to invest themselves more fully in it (May, et al., 2004:19). However, Comaroff and Comaroff (1992, in Ortner, 2006:132) warn us not to place an undue emphasis on desires and motives when looking at the implementation of agency because they are often irrelevant to outcomes, or, at the very least, have a mediated relationship to outcomes. When making decisions on how to proceed the subject weighs up many factors, not all of them conscious, and desires/motives are but an influence on this process. People will not necessarily embrace OHS when they have the knowledge and/or the desire, but they will at least know something about it and may adopt a position in relation to it. The chance that they will adopt a proactive position is increased in workplaces that ensure people have developed the required OHS knowledge and skills, foster their desire through motivating practices, and afford people the opportunities to enact their positions.

Agency must be negotiated within the pressures of what the discourse allows to be said and done. OHS agency is situated at the intersection of a capitalist discourse that privileges costs and production, and an OHS discourse that privileges health and safety. Many other axes such as gender, personal histories (and all that these encompass), and social expectations, intersect at this point to render interactions as complex and unique. At any one time there are multiple, competing and often contradictory discourses rather than a unified, single ideology. People have the opportunity to make choices although these are not simple and will take shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of feelings, thoughts and meanings (Ortner, 2006:110).

Where and how then do people learn to enact an OHS agency? In order to take up an agentic subject position, they must firstly be exposed to the discourse of OHS: they need information about OHS so they can understand more about



what the discourse claims and construct their own personally and culturally meaningful knowledges. For example, several interviewees extolled the virtues of meaningful training that allowed them to construct not only factual and cognitive knowledge, but also prepared them with skills for democratic decision making. In Chapter 4 I presented the results of a questionnaire in which 100% of the people who attended a 4-day OHS consultation course that I conducted said they will be able to use the information learned at the training course at work. Table 4, also in Chapter 4, showed that many of the people who attended my training felt as though, with a better understanding of their role, the requirements of OHS legislation and safe work procedures combined with a greater confidence and more practical skills, they will be more proactive in following and implementing OHS processes at work. If workers do not know about the workings of OHS discourse they are more likely to approach health and safety at work through their own embodied experiences of 'common sense' and temper their actions with the necessities and normalisations of the workplace demands. This usually means being careful not to get hurt while producing the required outcomes, and tends to place your body and your welfare in a subservient position to costs and production. However, when OHS is made an intrinsic part of how work is performed, when it is made a part of the '*structure*' of the workplace, it is more likely to be integrated as a fundamental component of people's thinking and acting.

It is the quality of the OHS positions people take up and why they adopt these positions that has been the subject of this thesis and I have shown that these processes are influenced by many factors. It is the second research question that seeks to describe these factors. The discussion of this second question helps explain how workers learn to take a proactive approach to OHS even when it requires them to disrupt the hegemony of costs and production over health and safety by challenging the local interpretation of OHS discourse and questioning some of the hollow practices that reify paperwork and codified knowledge over continuously negotiated praxis.

## Speaking Subjects

The third research question was 'How do workers become effective OHS consultative subjects?' Fundamental to the development of an agentic OHS subject position is the willingness and ability to speak up, to make one's voice heard, to become a speaking subject capable of using one's voice to describe hitherto concealed hazards and risks. Many people at each workplace have implicitly agreed on a certain way of thinking that consigns these hazards and risks to the shadows, to the margins; speaking them into existence would challenge unwritten social expectations that privilege production and costs over personal safety. Each workplace is made up of social groups of people that, while separate, overlap in complex and concatenating ways. Each person in these social groups shares 'a set of obviousnesses, or norms, and is positioned in relation to them' (Davies, 2000:23). That is, people tacitly agree on what is accepted as true, what is important, what can be ignored, what can be done and what can be said. To remain a legitimate member of this group a person will conform to these unwritten social rules. Kahn (1990, in May, et al., 2004:17) suggests that people who stay within the boundaries of those norms will feel a higher degree of psychological safety at work, and these co-worker agreed on norms tend to influence employee actions more than broader exhortations of the organisation. This is a very significant idea that is strongly suggested by the data and firmly links to the conundrums that the workers faced in the 'play' in the previous chapter. Interestingly, the stronger the peer pressure in the teams, the more threatening it becomes for members to break the rules because their emotional safety will be threatened by sanction from fellow team members. They may not speak up against a norm because they cannot trust their own team to support them in their speaking up.

Failler (2005) explores agency and the speaking subject in relation to Butler's (1997 in Failler 2005) theorizing. She argues that social constraints and regulatory norms condition our struggle for legitimacy as speaking subjects (Failler, 2005:96). To be allowed legitimate participation in any discourse we must know the difference between the speakable and the unspeakable: when we speak we must use 'foreclosure' (Failler, 2005:96-97), which is the refusal to

speaking the unspeakable. Speaking subjects must practise this foreclosure to remain both 'legitimate and intelligible participants in the symbolic order' (Failler, 2005:97). Hence, speaking and not speaking are both conditions of subject formation; consequently, if one speaks the unspeakable one risks sanction and the real possibility of being trivialized, sidelined and rendered unheard and thereby powerless. These boundaries between speakability and unspeakability actually pre-exist the speaking subject by being historically produced and limit speaking agency by actually limiting thought and suppressing truth.

The tendency to blame oneself for not being careful enough after one has an accident suggests that the individual's thinking is circumscribed to the extent that OHS becomes a matter of personal responsibility for one's safety, rather than one's actions being seen as a function of the system within which one operates. The often asked rhetorical question 'what can you do!' serves to cauterize the possibility of thought and sterilize the potential for a proactive push for change because there is no use in thinking the unspeakable.

Agency requires the disruption to these chains of foreclosures. According to Butler (1997, in Failler, 2005:102), these foreclosures on speakability are maintained through a discursive repetition – 'a repetition performed by the speaking subject who is compelled to repeat certain foreclosures in order to participate in speech'. Therefore, foreclosures themselves are never final but always a process because they need to be reiterated to maintain the power of their symbolic function. It is this impermanence that allows a space for the speaker to disrupt by either not repeating or beginning a different sort of repeating that resignifies the act of speaking.

This resignification produces new meaning for what it means to be an agentic OHS subject. If people were to speak up against the grain, so to speak, they signify a new path for the social relations to travel; and the more this path is trod, or the more the resignification is repeated, the more power it has to challenge old meanings of sense-making. People possess an awareness of the opportunities for agency and if they see that they have 'Repeated opportunities for efficacious action' (Hitlin & Elder, 2007:38), this knowledge will generate the perception of an increased ability to successfully engage in further action. I wish

to strongly emphasise the following sentence: **agency is grounded in a person's capacity to vary, rather than repeat, the foreclosures they utter as part of the discursive constitution of their subjectivity** (Barvosa-Carter, 2005:177).

This potential to vary their relationship to the speakable/unspeakable is possible because subjects are at least partially knowing subjects with some degree of reflexivity. Discourses contain within them the potential for counter discourse; they produce relations of power and communities of consent and dissent (MacLure, 2003:175). Agency looks for and finds 'openings for resistance and subversion' (Fenwick, 2006a:26) within discourses. People are thinking and desiring subjects with some 'penetration' into the ways they are being formed by their circumstances (Ortner, 2006:111). Very few subjects are fully dominated by the hegemonic structures of the dominant culture – there are always counter-currents (Ortner, 2006:126). People can and do choose to resist, change and make a difference (Jones, 2005:88), although this is always moderated by the parameters of the social structure within which they work and live. They can and do react against sets of circumstances and they do this in relation to the social situation in which they find themselves (Ortner, 2006:127). Subjects are neither wholly determined by social structures, nor are they independently free agents, but are both, simultaneously (Jones, 2005:89).

## **Learning Agency**

I have shown that this learning of agency is not straightforward; it is not simply a matter of telling people what they need to know and then they unproblematically do it - learning and agency are not like that. People are what they know – they come to work already believing that they know who they are and are attached to their concept or image of themselves, to their identity (Fenwick, 2006a:26). People are already involved in 'the multiplicity of social relations in which they are enmeshed' (Ortner, 2006:130) so they are never free or unfettered. OHS discourse has introduced new expectations for workers – they are now expected to be thinking, speaking, and acting subjects in relation to OHS. This represents a fundamental shift in power relations at work – instead of only being expected to do what they are told without question they are also now invited to speak up

and resist the expectations that they will work in unsafe conditions or perform unsafe acts. There is the invitation to renegotiate age-old inequalities in the employer/employee power relations. Yet, individuals do not necessarily embrace or accept this invitation; their former experiences, prejudices and beliefs influence their learning and knowledge as they make their own sense of the world and express their own autonomy in their own way (Harteis, et al., 2006:125). They know that the hierarchical power structures at work have not changed and remain robust, influential and potent.

Workplaces are complex systems and no two workplaces are the same, so I need to be cautious about making generalisations about how and why people adopt certain positions in regards to OHS – there is no single discourse or category of OHS. Notwithstanding this, the notions of OHS subjectivity and agency position certain practices within a discursive domain and have become part of an imperative to act. Most people in most workplaces, at least in Australia, must respond in some ways to the demands of OHS discourse. Yet, peoples' approach to OHS in their workplace is heavily influenced by the way it is introduced to them and the way their relationship to it is managed as an ongoing process. If the main thrust is perceived as a disciplinary and/or rule based approach they can become very suspicious and may adopt a defensive stance and withhold their knowledge or their effort. They will shut down their OHS subjectivity until it becomes a shiny exterior of glossy paperwork with a hollow core of signing and doing meaningless things. It will be corrupt and bereft and they will hold OHS in contempt or put it in a place of derision.

Alternatively, if they perceive that the invitation to participate is real, that they can share power, that they can make a difference, then they may allow themselves to make some early tentative steps to allowing an agentic OHS subjectivity to develop. Agency requires intention and desire, but intention and desire do not necessarily result in agency – it is either nourished or stunted under different regimes of power (Ortner, 2006:137). In the four previous chapters it was shown to be nourished by supportive management practices and stunted by a wide array of unsupportive practices from both their fellow workers and their managers. If they are nourished, and if they perceive these early

efforts as working, as useful, they will gain confidence in the process, they may even allow their motivation and desire to bubble up and become enthusiastic enough to hope and work for a better future. If this can happen they may be on the way to developing an agentic OHS subjectivity.

## **Trust**

A strong theme to emerge in the data analysis chapters is that people are more likely to speak up when they trust that it is safe to do so. Trust can be defined as a 'belief or confidence that one party has about another party's characteristics that may increase willingness to take risks and ultimately help "solve" the social dilemma' (Ferrin, Bligh, & Kohles, 2007:469). Dirks and Ferrin (2000) summarised decades of research on the consequences of trust on leadership and report that trust is significantly related to job performance, organisational citizenship behaviours, intent to quit, organisational commitment and job satisfaction. In a later paper, Dirks and Ferrin (2001) developed a theory to help provide insight into the processes through which trust affects organisational outcomes. McEvily et al (2003:91) emphasise the important effects trust has on organisational phenomena such as communication, conflict management, negotiation processes, satisfaction and performance. May et al (2004:16) suggest that workers who believe they are in a trustworthy environment are more likely to engage more fully at work, try out novel ways of doing things, and discuss mistakes and learn from them.

This thesis was not designed to review the influence of trust on the development of OHS subjectivities, but trust has been revealed as a consistent thread throughout the data. For example, in the two previous chapters it was shown that people are more willing to speak up when they feel it is safe to do so; people more willingly and voluntarily engage with organisational objectives when they feel they are trusted; people are more proactive in creatively and safely managing hazards and risks when they feel trusted; managers feel they need to monitor employee behaviour less when they trust their employees; all levels of workers behave more cooperatively when they work in a trusting environment and conversely, resist organisation OHS objectives when in a mistrusting environment; students are more likely to open up to the discourse of OHS when

they trust the teacher/trainer; workers are more likely to follow procedures and wear PPE when they trust the safety adviser or safety representative within an organisation; workers are more likely to view OHS as suffused with hidden agendas when they distrust the management who initiate those OHS programs; and workers are more likely to report incidents when they trust the process.

Managers and leaders have a lot of influence over creating such a trusting environment. The relationship with one's immediate manager can have a dramatic impact on one's perception of the psychological safety of the workplace (May, et al., 2004:16). A democratic style of leadership that truly engages with workers has been shown in this thesis as a very effective way of creating and encouraging such a trusting context within which to negotiate outcomes acceptable to all parties. May et al (2004:16) suggest that supervisor supportiveness of employees and congruent perceptions between supervisors and employees have both been linked with enhanced trust overall. However, it is not only necessary that employees trust employers, but the trust needs to suffuse the organisation in a rhizomatic fashion so that managers trust employees, employees trust each other, the OHS representative is trusted by and trusts the people who elected her, managers trust each other, the corporate head office creates a trusting environment for their regional senior managers to speak up and challenge global dictates, and so on. The trusting relationships are multitude, reciprocal and interdependent. At one and the same time one must trust and be trusted. Ferrin et al (2007:467) suggest that the feeling of being trusted is usually correlated with trust in another person, in a dyad, so to speak, which explicitly recognises the interdependency of trusting relationships.

There is a dearth of OHS specific research that specifically attempts to assess the relationship between levels of trust at workplaces and OHS. However, Gunningham and Sinclair (2008) evaluated such a relationship in the coal mining industry in NSW and Queensland and found that mistrust between workers and management was crucial in predicting communication and OHS outcomes:

...we found that when mistrust was not overcome, then workers treated almost all management safety initiatives with suspicion and refused to buy into them. Consequently, even with the best of intentions on part of

corporate management, the most sophisticated and ambitious OHS management tools the presence or absence of trust has the potential to determine the ultimate success or failure of such initiatives, and thereby greatly influence OHS outcomes.

Workplaces are faced with a conundrum presented by OHS discourse. A fundamental component of our economic system is management prerogative, which gives certain workers, specifically managers and supervisors, authority to tell other workers what to do; this places them in a position of having control and influence at work. Our legal system translates this by allocating to such people a statutory duty of care to ensure a safe workplace for workers. It is a defence in court if they prove they acted with due diligence, which is demonstrated by such evidence as documentation of their efforts to comply. This inferred requirement for supporting documents has given rise to a proliferation of management initiated paper-based, auditable and rules oriented OHS management systems that are often perceived by workers as being given more importance than their actual safety; the emphasis can easily become getting the paperwork right, rather than the safety right. Paperwork subsumes safety and is driven by management to protect themselves, which induces the conundrum. Contemporary prevention policy becomes at best non-motivational and reactive and is steeped in a repressive atmosphere of rules, responsibilities, inspection and guilt (Van de Kerckhove, 2006:55). When OHS is managed in this way, and my research suggests it often is, it reinforces a capitalist discourse grounded in top-down management prerogative and tends to destroy the conditions conducive to a bottom-up, employee driven consultation process of speaking up.

This is supported by trust research; McEvily et al (2003:98) suggest that while the adoption of legalistic and bureaucratic procedures can engender a sense of reliability in an organisation, these same mechanisms can inhibit and undermine the development of trust. The authors go on to say that formal control mechanisms can foster attitudes of ill-will, skepticism and distrust by signaling suspicion (McEvily et al, 2003: 99). From an OHS standpoint, the reification of OHS management systems to the extent that people sign documents they do not believe in could undermine the trust employees have in those systems. For trust to emerge, organisations must grant workers the freedom to use their own



discretion on how to fulfill their obligations (McEvily, et al., 2003:99). Van de Kerckhove (2006:64-66) suggests that enormous creative energy is released towards a proactive pursuit of OHS objectives when employees act from intrinsic motivation rather than from external directives.

Bernoth (2009) found that mistrust between managers and employees in the aged care sector was a major contributor to the apparent failure of manual handling training programs to improve health and safety for workers. One of her participants, Deb, expressed in her story *you can't speak up* and at the same time be free from the ire of management (Bernoth 2009:138). Somerville (2003) noted that work practices of coal miners sometimes deviated from established safe working practices but the miners distrusted paper knowledge and procedures developed by people who did not work underground. Similarly, in previous research (Wadick, 2005a) I found that subcontractors in the construction industry had a strong distrust of paper based policies and procedures and preferred to rely on their own common sense and reflective practice. According to McEvily et al (2003:97), from the standpoint of the receiver, trust affects the perceived veracity of the knowledge. Miners and subcontractors dismiss the knowledge from the not-trusted source, and expend extra time and effort verifying the accuracy and usefulness of the knowledge. Hence, this knowledge from a not-trusted source is less likely to help the miners or subcontractors create the new knowledge required for working safely in contemporary workplaces.

In separate research (Wadick, 2009b) I also found that workers on large construction sites often do not speak up because workplace practices in the past have penalised them for this and they now do not trust that they can, despite corporate OHS rhetoric that invites them to do so. Petrovic-Lazarevic and Perry (2004:7) found one construction company stated that a goal of safety education was to get workers to see the safety committee as an ally by creating a no blame culture that employees trusted. The trust consequently engendered helped to motivate the employees to practise safe work methods. This was challenging because of the traditional low trust and adversarial relationships

between industry management and builders unions (Petrovic-Lazarevic & Perry, 2004:10).

The genealogy of OHS presented in Chapter 2, as well as some of the data, demonstrated that there is a history of mistrust between various stakeholders in the context of work. This is especially true for the distrust that has developed between employers and employees, who have extremely differential access to power. A critical question for OHS is how to build trust between historically mistrusted parties. Research reported by Sørensen et al (2009:662) shows that both management and employee representatives in a new system that integrates safety committees with senior management committees in Denmark suggests that meaningful cooperation does take place, whereas it was rarer in the old system of separate committees. 'Health and safety reps can make their voice heard to top management who have the financial power to make decisions' (Sørensen et al, 2009:662). Significantly, according to their interviews, a core issue is the development of mutual trust between the parties – both employee and management representatives attributed the increased collaboration achieved to improvement in trust (Sørensen et al, 2009:665).

My research also demonstrates that the development of OHS subjectivities is not solely each individual's isolated journey: OHS subjectivities are developed through social processes such as communication and negotiation. Actions are interpreted symbolically and their meanings are transacted by the group, although each person puts their own interpretation on any culturally derived consensus because they perceive the world from their own ontological and epistemological stance. The data has revealed how risk perception and risk management are heavily and continuously negotiated within social contexts. Interestingly, trust helps to shape and mediate these interaction patterns that form the basis of the workplace social system (McEvily et al, 2003:93). Trust (or the lack of it) motivates people in making their decisions on whether to contribute to the social network or to withhold their enthusiasm, or even actively/passively resist entreaties or expectations levelled at them. For instance, trust encourages knowledge sharing by 'increasing the disclosure of

knowledge to others and by granting others access to one's knowledge' (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001 in McEvily et al, 2003: 97).

Trust is fragile in many ways, it is an heuristic part of the social process and it can be strengthened or weakened by behaviours of the individuals or groups involved. Trust seems to be a very important organising principle for social relations; and we have seen throughout this thesis that a significant component of the management of OHS is a social process, so it may be confidently inferred that trust is a basic organising principle for good OHS management, although it is complex, contradictory, and fraught with potential pitfalls. Trust is never final, but always negotiated; it is not easy to quantify and relies on judgements based on social knowledge (McEvily et al, 2003:100). However, there has been little research from the perspective of rebuilding, creating, or maintaining trust in organisations (McEvily et al, 2003:100). I suggest this as a potentially very productive area for OHS research.

### **How does my research contribute to scholarship?**

The research described in this thesis contributes to scholarship in several ways. I as a researcher have benefited enormously from conducting this research and writing this thesis. It has helped me understand my fields of practice, namely education and occupational health and safety more deeply and more perceptively. I appreciate more now the intricacies of how people learn and the fact that for this learning to result in sustained behavioural changes, people need to integrate this learning into who they are. Learning to the extent that one changes one's behaviour as a result of that learning is a complex process that involves much more than cognitive information. It also involves affect and desire, it involves one's concept of who one is, and it involves how one is positioned within social/cultural relationships. Purely cognitive information can easily be dismissed as irrelevant, unimportant or just plain wrong, when it is not congruent with one's embodied experiences or one's social/cultural milieu. Cognitive information is but one source that makes claims to truth, and these claims are evaluated and prioritised against other claims before they are confirmed as valuable and worthwhile. New cognitive information may be only partially

accepted or agreed to, subject to certain conditions; it is precarious, contested, and a subject/object of appropriation.

This has major implications for OHS training, which, to date, has been undertheorised from a learning perspective. It means that participants of training courses do not unproblematically acquire or adopt OHS knowledge, but need to construct it through mechanisms of actively processing it in several ways, before trialling it as one possibility among many as valuable. No matter what knowledge or skills these people may learn to construct and develop in training courses, their ability to render them useful back at the workplace, that is, to transfer them into valuable and valued competencies, is heavily influenced by the particular workplace dynamics. These dynamics are tensions produced by pressures exerted at the nexus of power relations, workplace priorities, social environment, levels of trust, management and leadership styles, and OHS hazards/risks.

This research has contributed to the field of OHS scholarship in several ways. I am particularly excited about my construction, through my writing and reflexive processes, of the OHS triangle spoken about in chapter five. This concept suggests that for people to adopt effective agentic OHS subject positions, three preconditions should exist. Firstly, people need to develop valued and meaningful knowledge about OHS discourse through access to trusted, timely and relevant information: they need to know about hazards and risks, they need to understand what their rights are, and have developed the competencies to exercise their rights. Secondly, they require the opportunity to use these knowledges and skills. For example, the workplace must prioritise, value and demonstrate the means and methods of speaking up, for reporting, assessing and controlling hazards and risks, for consulting with fellow workers, and for refusing to perform dangerous work. Thirdly, workers must have the desire to enact these competencies in a manner that is recognised and appreciated by the workplace structures and relations. For instance, if workers trust that their actions and/or words are efficacious they will be more motivated to carry them out; if workers believe that their wellbeing is a value of the workplace, they are more likely to proactively search for strategies to enhance their own wellbeing and that of their fellow workers.

If any of these three elements of the triangle are missing then OHS agency is severely obstructed. The presence of all three elements does not guarantee OHS agency of workers, but they provide fertile ground in which agency can thrive. This OHS triangle may appear intuitive, but the direct, yet complex interrelationships between the three elements came as a surprise to me. The naming of this triangle helps me situate my endeavours in my OHS work, clarifies strategies I may be able to employ, illustrates the points of leverage I said in chapter five that I wanted to identify, and helps me to improve my capacity to make a difference.

An exciting understanding I have learned is my increased appreciation of how power is acutely implicated in the construction of OHS subjects and OHS agency. The field of OHS is broad and covers many disciplines, including the physical and social sciences, mathematics, economics, engineering, law, biology, epidemiology, and medicine. My interest and area of expertise lies within the social sciences and so my research has been firmly set within parameters defined by how people intersect with OHS discourse, how they construct OHS discourse, and how they construct themselves in relation to it. This research has clearly demonstrated that OHS subjectivities are always formed in relation to power; that speaking and acting, or words and behaviours, are always contingent on the workplace power arrangements and how power is put to work by all the actors. After this thesis is finished I will continue to develop my thinking on this topic and attempt to disseminate my theorising and findings to a wider audience through publications, conference presentations and in my own training courses.

## **Recommendations for OHS practice**

In this section I offer some suggestions based on how the research outcomes intersect with the literature. If these suggestions are implemented they may help encourage the development of proactive agentic OHS subjects, who may through their words and actions improve the health and safety of workers at their workplaces. I fashion these recommendations around the schema expressed and described in the thesis as the OHS triangle, which consists of knowledge/skills, opportunity, and desire. To recap this concept, I suggested

that OHS agency will be enhanced in workplaces that attend to all the following elements – ensure workers have adequate OHS knowledge and skills, provide ample opportunity to use this knowledge and skills, and kindle their desire to do so.

By using the term OHS triangle I am not suggesting that the three elements are separate, or in opposition as part of either-or binaries. These concepts are interrelated, interdependent, and mutually constitutive; each holds fertile potential for interaction with the other. They set up a cyclic and self-reinforcing vortex that will sustain and nourish OHS agency when they are thoroughly integrated into ‘how we do things around here’. The successful negotiation of these elements will help the two currently almost mutually exclusive strands of OHS to combine more, leaking and folding into each other, informing each other, integrating their strengths and uniting in a common purpose.

The OHS triangle approach offers workplaces a comprehensive, although perhaps radical, framework to help them devise their own local and specific action plan. It does not provide a blue print or success formula, but merely identifies the elements that participants in this research spoke about as meaningful in the constitution of themselves as OHS subjects. When implementing the relevant activities associated with such a program, all actors/stakeholders must be acutely and reflexively aware of how power operates in all its micro locations. This must be picked apart, teased out and named in order for it to be adequately addressed.

The influence of power cannot be avoided so it must be put to productive work; the only way to give this a chance of success is to open it up to view in all its manifestations. Power is even implicated in attempting to use the OHS triangle approach in workplaces. For example, such an intervention strategy will more than likely begin as a top-down approach initiated by management and/or the safety manager. At the early planning stage it will be imperative to engage workers enough so they trust the process or they will not reveal their hidden knowledges, they will not trust that things can change. Perhaps the very first step will be to map the microphysics of how power operates before the details of the next stages can be developed and articulated.

## **Knowledge and skills**

- All workers need to have an understanding of their responsibilities and rights under OHS legislation, which may be achieved initially through training/awareness courses, and supported in an ongoing fashion by regular coaching and mentoring.
- Workers require the skills to participate in risk assessments to facilitate relevant, meaningful and timely risk reduction interventions.
- Workers need to develop the knowledge and skills that will allow them to effectively engage in such consultation processes as speaking up assertively.
- Workers need to be able to competently use the local and specific incident/near miss/hazard reporting systems and processes, including how to challenge hegemonic and normalising influences of the status quo.
- Transparent decision making processes will keep workers informed of how their input contributes to outcomes.

## **Opportunity**

- All workers require the opportunity to attend meaningful and effective OHS training/awareness sessions to help them create the required knowledge/skills.
- OHS should be on the agenda of all workplace meetings, and preferably be the first item. This should include how items from previous meetings have been actioned.
- Managers and leaders incorporate OHS words and actions into all their behaviours and give it equal priority to production and profits.
- Ample culturally appropriate opportunities must be made available for all workers to report concerns, hazards, risks and incidents. Once reported,

there must be a feedback loop so that they know their report has been addressed.

- Similarly, ample and relevant opportunities must be provided for all workers to participate meaningfully in risk assessments.
- OHS committees, representatives and safety managers/advisers need to be visible, available and very interested in what employees have to say.

## **Desire**

- Training and awareness courses need to be based on learning principles that help workers democratically and actively create the meaningful knowledge and skills required to avail themselves of the opportunities. Teaching must not be seen as the simple transmission of facts but as a political process that firstly respects the participants and then encourages them to question and dissent, to develop the skills for active participation in creating safer workplaces, to develop a thirst for an agency that can challenge hegemonic powers.
- A democratic, participatory and friendly leadership style will encourage an efficacious environment which will help workers feel they can contribute their ideas.
- Management can consciously endeavour to create a trusting environment in which workers trust that their voices will be heard, they will not be punished or censured for speaking up, and that their opinions are valued.
- A workplace that encourages criticism, dissent and the admission of error, and uses them for learning will support reporting and speaking up.
- An effective and agentic OHS committee/rep/manager will help motivate workers to participate in their work.
- A safety manager who is a very good communicator, who has the skills of active and empathic listening, who is an effective negotiator, mentor and



coach, and who actions suggestions from employees, will stimulate behaviours motivated by efficacy.

## **Future Research**

My research has been exploratory, and hence, very broad; it has nevertheless highlighted several features of how OHS discourse operates in a cross section of workplaces. When I began this research my ambition may have been to say something of relevance across diverse settings looking for a 'success formula' (Alvesson, 2002:93) for the universal and successful recipe for the development of proactive and agentic OHS subjectivities. However, this is not possible because of the diversity and richness of the myriad people involved across infinite and infinitely diverse workplaces. A generic statement would fall far short of its goal and be ridiculous in its attempts. It is therefore difficult to make broad universal claims that encompass all OHS subjectivities. But this does not mean that it is futile to try to describe those factors that facilitate and lubricate the development of agentic OHS subjectivities. This thesis has brought attention to some of these factors and I recommend that future research delves deeper into examining the role they play. In the following section I make recommendations for four such research projects that will help build on the knowledge created by this thesis.

### **Research project 1**

This action research project would attempt to implement the OHS triangle theory into a workplace, follow it through, and assess its effectiveness. It would map power, assess the safety culture of a workplace against the three elements of the triangle, design interventions in continuous consultation with workers and management, and track their implementation. It would be extremely important that the workers have full input into the design, implementation and evaluation stages of the project.

Given the importance placed on 'costs' by the majority of participants in this research, assessment of the effectiveness of this project should include a longitudinal cost-benefit analysis that quantifies either extra costs/lower productivity or lower costs/increased productivity, considering the whole gamut

of implications of production such as outputs, inputs, efficiency, lost time, quality, staff turnover, absenteeism, presenteeism, morale and so on.

### **Research project 2**

Establish links between training, the workplace, and the development of proactive OHS subjectivities. This would need to theorise learning principles in relation to OHS training, understand types of training and training styles, interpret workplace culture and power arrangements, and then take a longitudinal look at how/if/why the trainees use/do not use the knowledge and skills created at the training to improve employee health and safety.

### **Research project 3**

Specifically research the influence of trust on the development of OHS subjectivities; this could include the building, creating and maintaining of trust between all stakeholders. This could include exploring the impact of caring, participatory leadership, listening, nurturing and creating a trusting environment, on the development of OHS subjectivities.

### **Research project 4**

The data in this thesis has demonstrated and stressed the importance of leadership and management on the development of proactive OHS subjectivities. The goal of research project 4 would be to uncover possible connections between leadership and management styles and the development of OHS subjectivities. As in the previous research projects this would map the micro workings of power as it distributes throughout the organisation and see how these constitute individuals.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explicitly addressed the three research questions of this thesis by grounding the words and experiences of the participants in relevant literature. In response to the first research question that asked how workers enact OHS subjectivities, it was shown that workers adopt multiple and sometimes contradictory OHS subject positions in the efforts to meet contingent

requirements of various coexistent perceived pressures and needs. Learning to enact these subjectivities is a social process and mutually constituted through discursive practices. OHS subjectivities are never fixed or final, but their development is ongoing, always contingent, iterative and heuristically reflexive.

The second research question speaks of the relationship between subjectivity and agency: OHS discourse has opened up possibilities for new subject positions but has not guaranteed them or shown how they can be taken up. It is not easy for people to change because they have invested themselves heavily in their concept of who they are. OHS agency is difficult to enact because it entails challenging and resisting the received and normalized practices of the workplace. However, the likelihood of people adopting agentic subject positions is increased if they learn about and understand OHS discourse, if they are inspired and motivated to act, and if they are given ample opportunity to act.

My third research question asked how workers become effective OHS consultative subjects, how they learn to speak up about any OHS concerns they have and how they make suggestions or engage in meaningful discussions. As with subjectivity and agency, using one's voice is subject to many influences and pressures. Workplace norms can render hazards and risks as invisible and so they do not invite speaking about. Workplace pressures constrain or encourage speaking – people will rarely dare to speak the unspeakable. A person's agency is grounded in their capacity to speak the unspeakable, to resist the hegemony that targets those who exercise a dissenting voice.

A strong theme identified in the stories of the participants is that people are more likely to speak and act with agency when they trust it is safe to do so, and managers and leaders have a lot of influence in creating such a trusting environment. I suggested that trust is a useful concept to use as an organising principle when trying to understand how best to encourage people to adopt agentic OHS subject positions.

I also discussed in this chapter how my research contributes to scholarship in the fields of OHS and education, and how the use of a poststructural framework makes an important contribution to understanding how to improve OHS by

paying attention to the formation of workers' subjectivities within the discursive formations of OHS in Australia. Subjectivity, agency and power are all implicated in the construction of the safe workplace, and if they are ignored OHS discourse will not reach its full potential.

The final section of this concluding chapter suggested four research projects that, if implemented, may help continue the work started in this thesis and flesh out more fully the factors that impinge on the creation of agentic OHS subjects.

I bring this thesis to a close in the following coda which contains a poem titled 'Swansong PhD poem'. I wrote this for and presented it to the research students attending my final university intensive workshop. It helps summarise how I, as a researcher, have negotiated the process of conducting and writing this research, and opens up to view aspects of my affective and desiring self.

## Coda: *Swansong PhD Poem*

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Well, it's nearly over,  
And I'm nearly there,  
'though plenty of work still left to do.

It's been quite a process  
these 3 years and a half.  
Why did I do it?  
Why did I subject myself to this force?  
It's been a dream I've had for years,  
although I don't know why I had this dream.  
It was more about the lifestyle than anything else, I'm sure.  
It sounded pretty cushy,  
acting out my eternal adolescent,  
my philosophical self.  
Just had to read a bit,  
talk to people and write it down.  
I could do that,  
Easy.

Well,  
in retrospect,  
Let's say it was different to easy,  
and more like exhaustive work;  
although self-employed, which suits me fine.

There were some things I did not foresee.  
The loneliness for one –  
working by yourself,  
not much talk at all.  
Cut off from the world of work,  
and not invited by the world of work,  
perhaps,  
not even valued by the world of work.

I did not know it would not answer my existential question,  
my thirst to belong.  
And where do I belong?  
I'm still not so sure.  
I haven't been discovered,

except that I have discovered  
some things about myself –  
how good I am at gardening  
and keeping the kitchen clean.  
In fact, I might have discovered more about myself  
than knowledge I did create.

I indulged myself  
and found another medium for my creative urge;  
and this one is fairly kind to my body,  
as long as I keep it in check  
because your body also needs to work.

It's also good for my mind,  
although mind work tires you out.  
(as an aside, I hope it burns those calories that sitting makes you eat).

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.

Where to from here, and well you might ask.  
It's been a pleasure, but I can't see how it will unfold.  
I feel a better person  
more at peace from within.  
And, if nothing else,  
that will have to do.

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## Appendix A. Written questionnaire

Will you be able to use the information from this course at work?

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If the answer to the above question was yes, or some of it, how will it help make your workplace safer?

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What are the challenges you see in implementing this information at work?

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What would make it easier to implement at work?

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Any other comments about making the workplace safer?

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Thank you for being part of this research

## Appendix B. Conference discussion exercises 1 and 2

### Exercise 1.

In your table groups, please discuss the questions:

1. What is an effective OHS worker?
2. What contributes to making people effective OHS workers?
3. How do you ensure this in your training or at your workplace?

## **Exercise 2.**

**Discuss in your table group, & each person who conducts training write at least one response to each of the questions:**

1. What are some things you do to make the participants feel safe, secure and welcomed into your class?

2. What are some things you do that may threaten their feelings of safety and security?

3. What are the impacts for learning?



## **Appendix C. Participant Information Pack**

MONASH UNIVERSITY

10<sup>th</sup> November 2008

**Explanatory Statement – for participants in the following research**

**Title:** *Workers' perceptions of OHS at their workplace*

This information sheet is for you to keep.

My name is Phil Wadick and I am conducting a research project with Margaret Somerville, a professor in the Faculty of Education, towards a PhD at Monash University. This means that I will be writing a thesis which is the equivalent of a 300 page book and several articles to be published in journals, and will present my findings to conferences.

I am asking you to be a participant for several reasons. Firstly, you have come to my occupational health and safety (OHS) training course or are known to me through other means and have some knowledge and/or experience of occupational health and safety. Secondly, you may have an interest in the topic of occupational health and safety. Thirdly, I would like to hear what you have to say about your experiences with OHS.

### *The aim/purpose of the research*

I am conducting this research to find out more about how people experience OHS at their workplace. The reason for doing this is to understand what is involved in creating safe and healthy workplaces, what enables the improvement of health and safety at work, and what barriers reduce the effectiveness of its implementation.

### *Possible benefits*

This research may help make occupational health and safety management more people friendly by influencing policy makers or program administrators. It may even help OHS outcomes by helping to improve OHS training.

### *What does the research involve?*

The study involves a combination of focus groups and or semi structured interviews with individuals that will be tape recorded and transcribed.

### *How much time will the research take?*

Focus groups will be held after each day of training and will take approximately 40 minutes each. If you would like to participate I invite you to come to one focus group.

Interviews will last approximately up to one hour each for each person who consents to be interviewed.

### *Inconvenience/discomfort*

You may be inconvenienced by giving some of your time to this project. You may also feel a level of distress if you talk about experiences that were upsetting for you or your colleagues. You could also be concerned at the lack of attention to OHS at your workplace.

### *Payment*

There is no payment or reward being offered for your participation in this research project

### *Can I withdraw from the research?*

Being in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. However, if you do consent to participate, you may have your interview data withdrawn from the study only before the thesis, journal articles and/or conference papers have been submitted. It will not be possible to withdraw the information gained from the focus group in which you participated. You can leave an interview or focus group at any time, with absolutely no penalty or negative consequences for you.

### *Confidentiality*

Confidentiality and anonymity of the data will be managed throughout the entire project by the use of pseudonyms for participants' names or the names of companies. No person or business will be identified in publications or in conference presentations.

### *Storage of data*

Storage of the data collected will adhere to the University regulations and be kept at the premises of the researcher in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet for 5 years. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

### *Results*

**If you would like to be informed of the aggregate research finding, please contact Phil Wadick on [REDACTED] or email [REDACTED]. The findings are accessible for up to three years after the date of this document.**

If you would like to contact the researcher's supervisor about any aspect of this study, please contact the Chief Investigator:	If you have a complaint concerning the manner in which this research is being conducted, please contact:
Margaret Somerville [REDACTED] Email: [REDACTED]	Executive Officer Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans (SCERH) Building 3e Room 111 Research Office Monash University VIC 3800 Tel: +61 3 9905 2052 Fax: +61 3 9905 1420 Email: <a href="mailto:scerh@adm.monash.edu.au">scerh@adm.monash.edu.au</a>

**Thank you.**



Phil Wadick

Consent Form

Title: **Workers' perceptions of OHS at their workplace**

**NOTE: This consent form will remain with the Monash University researcher for their records**

I agree to take part in the Monash University research project specified above. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the Explanatory Statement, which I keep for my records. I understand that agreeing to take part means that:

I agree to be interviewed by the researcher ☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree to allow the interview to be audio-taped ☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree to attend a focus group ☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree to allow the focus group to be audio taped ☐ Yes ☐ No

and

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

and

I understand that any data that the researcher extracts from the interview or focus group for use in reports or published findings will not, under any circumstances, contain names or identifying characteristics.

and

I understand that I can view the interview transcript and that I understand how identifiable the information will be

and

I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party.

and

I understand that data from the interview/focus group/transcript/audio-tape will be kept in a secure storage and accessible to the research team. I also understand that the data will be destroyed after a 5 year period unless I consent to it being used in future research.

Participant's name

Signature

Date

The following sample questions may be used. However, they are purely an indication of the types of questions to be asked, and the types of information being sought. The interview will be more like a conversation than following a pre set list of questions.

Suggested questions and/or topics for interviews and focus groups.

A. Demographic data

1. **What age bracket do you fit into? 18-25, 26-40, 41-55, 56-70**
2. **What is your position held at work?**
3. **What are your OHS responsibilities at work?**
4. **Have you done any OHS training? What sort? How long did it go for? How often? What did you think of it? How did it affect your understanding of OHS? How did it affect your OHS behaviours?**

B. OHS interview questions

1. **Can you tell me about how occupational health and safety (OHS) is managed at your workplace, or a workplace with which you are familiar. How does this work for you?**
2. **Can you give an example of what people do or have done in regards to OHS? How effective is this?**
3. **How have you learned about OHS? Has this been helpful? Why, why not? Do you have any suggestions for improving how we learn about OHS?**
4. **Is there any dangerous work that you perform? What are the hazards associated with your work? [Include psychological and health hazards, not just the obvious physical hazards]. Do you report any of these? Why, why not?**
5. **Do you have an OHS committee or OHS representatives at your workplace? How effective are they? Why, why not?**
6. **Do you think OHS could be improved at your workplace? Why, why not? How? Can you give any practical examples?**
7. **What safe things do people do at your work? What unsafe things do they do? Why do they do unsafe things? What can the organization do about it? Will this work? Why, why not? What else can be done?**
8. **Do you have any OHS stories that you'd like to tell?**
9. **Are there any other comments you'd like to make about how to understand or improve how OHS is implemented at work?**

## **Appendix D. Safety Observations Questionnaire**

### **BEHAVIOUR BASED SAFETY (SAFETY OBSERVATIONS)**

**Exercise 1: In small groups, answer the following questions. Each group will report back to the main group. Information will be used as part of a PhD project.**

- 1. What safety observations have you been involved in?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2. When does this occur?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3. What actually happens?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 4. Why is it done?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 5. What are the advantages?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 6. What are the disadvantages?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 7. Any suggestions for improvement?**

## Appendix E. Interview participants

Name	Industry	Position	OHS Rep	Age
Billy	Construction	Labourer	No	26-40
Cheryl	Community Services	Customer Service Officer	Yes	41-55
Colin	University academic	Lecturer	Yes	26-40
Derek	Construction	Tradesperson	Yes	41-55
Gary	Construction	Safety Adviser	No	41-55
Ivan	Local Government	Middle manager	Yes	26-40
Laurence	Metal trades	Retired tradesperson	No	70+
Luke	OHS	Consultant and trainer	No	56-69
Mark	Transport/ logistics	Truck driver	No	41-55
Mick	Construction	Labourer	No	41-55
Natalie	Local Government	Area library manager	Yes	41-55
Paul	Community services	Therapist	No	56-69
Peter	OHS	Trainer	No	41-55
Rose	Community services	Area manager	No	41-55
Terry	Manufacturing	HSE training adviser	No	41-55
Zella	Education	Preschool teacher	No	26-40